

RETURNING TO THE 'SOIL OF THE SENSIBLE' :
PHENOMENOLOGICAL READINGS OF ROBERT
MORRIS'S AND RICHARD SERRA'S MINIMALIST
SCULPTURE

Sandra Kaye Alexander

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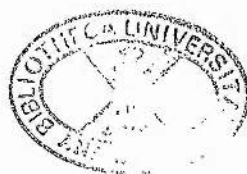
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Sandra Kaye Alexander

Returning to the 'Soil of the Sensible':
Phenomenological Readings of
Robert Morris's and Richard Serra's Minimalist Sculpture

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I, Sandra K. Alexander, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 30,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is a record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

30th September 1998

I was admitted as a research student in September 1996 and as a candidate for the degree of M.Phil. in September 1997; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St. Andrews between 1996 and 1998.

30th September 1998

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of M.Phil. in the University of St. Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

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An Abstract

This assessment of the Minimalist sculpture of artists Robert Morris and Richard Serra endeavours not only to describe the ways in which Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy has been utilised to analyse the formal character of their work, but also to question the extent to which critical interpretations of such artworks may lay claim to their intended meaning. Firstly, Merleau-Ponty's significant text, the *Phenomenology of Perception*, will be introduced by exploring a number of its themes relating to perception and to how the body acts as a locus for human experience within the phenomenal world. Secondly, it will be shown how notable comments taken from the *Phenomenology* have been discussed in relation to several of Robert Morris's Minimalist artworks made between 1962 and 1969. Next, additional ideas taken from the *Phenomenology* will be brought to bear on the Minimalist sculpture of Richard Serra whose artworks and writings from between 1966 and 1980 have also been interpreted, like those of Morris, to be products of a general phenomenological 'sensitivity'.

Yet as part of the conclusion to this thesis, the contemporary, critical reception of Morris's and Serra's works will be discussed and particularly, the problematic ways in which Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory has been used by commentators to 'explain' several of the non-traditional aspects of their practice. This ultimately serves to bring into question the applicability of such theory to these artists' production. Firstly, we will inspect what evidence is provided by Morris's and Serra's artworks and writings which would support their connection with Pontean theory. Secondly, we will look at just how critics cite Merleau-Ponty's text as a source for Minimalist practice. At the end of such analyses, we may be better able to assess whether the rigorous interpretation of many of these artists' works by way of the *Phenomenology* is justified, or whether this critical trend is a misapplication of a complex philosophical theory to an equally complex and multivalent form of art practice.

Contents

Acknowledgements

Abstract

| | |
|--|-----------|
| Chapter 1. An Introduction | 1 |
| Chapter 2. Merleau-Ponty's <i>Phenomenology of Perception</i> and Its Conception of Human Experience | 6 |
| I. Grounding Perception In the World | |
| II. Returning to Phenomena | |
| Chapter 3. Robert Morris: Revising Art Practice | 22 |
| I. The Spectator as a Perceiving Subject | |
| II. The Act of Making and the Artist as a Perceiving Subject | |
| Chapter 4. Richard Serra: Diversifying Art Experience | 41 |
| I. Formal Diversity in Serra's Early Work | |
| II. Contextual Diversity in Serra's Work After 1970 | |
| Chapter 5. Sources, Texts and Interpretation: Using Merleau-Ponty's <i>Phenomenology of Perception</i> in the Criticism of Minimalist Sculpture | 58 |
| I. Looking Beyond the <i>Phenomenology</i> in the Writings of Morris and Serra | |
| II. Questioning Interpretation: Minimalism's Critical Reception and Its Difficulties | |
| III. In Conclusion | |
| Selected Bibliography | 83 |

Figures

Chapter 1

An Introduction

How may one attempt, in the space of a single discussion, to present two very distinct and seemingly unrelated histories of human activity, one stemming from the traditions of Continental philosophy and the other emerging from the contemporary, American art 'scene' of the 1960s? Perhaps more importantly within the context of this discussion, one should ask not just how these issues will be introduced here, but also, to what extent is phenomenological theory actually relevant to the Minimalist artworks of sculptors Robert Morris and Richard Serra?

The unique phenomenological position developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in France between the 1940s and 1960s - an attitude given full exploration in his major work *Phénoménologie de la perception*, or the *Phenomenology of Perception*¹ - is one related specifically to the revision of attitudes toward the nature of human perception and its inherence in a world of objects, or what are termed 'phenomena'. This text along with Merleau-Ponty's other theoretical works, such as his *La Structure du Comportement*,² constitute a concerted move away from a Cartesian sensibility which privileges the intellect and a move toward a philosophy intent on a 'return to phenomena', or to the objects of consciousness. His revision of this traditional approach to understanding the world-as-lived stems from Edmund Husserl's early phenomenological project but also ultimately differs from it. Husserl's original search for the 'essences' or meanings of perceived phenomena contrasts significantly with Merleau-Ponty's motivations: to revise the study of perception so that it isolates the importance of 'existence' rather than

¹Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945) and *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962). Hereafter referred to as the *Phénoménologie* and the *Phenomenology*, respectively.

²Idem. *La Structure du Comportement* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1942).

'essence'.³ The semantic differences between these two possible goals or 'ends' of the phenomenological reduction are not minor; whereas the search for the *essences* of 'things' or phenomena requires some form of conscious inquiry beyond the perception of the things themselves, the acknowledgement of their *existence* is immediate and pre-intellectual. Likewise, Merleau-Ponty's project can be seen revising phenomenologist Martin Heidegger's concentration on the importance of time or temporality to lived experience - an attitude forcefully declared in Heidegger's seminal text *Sein und Zeit*.⁴ Yet at every point in his philosophical proposals, and especially in those offered in the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty tethers his inspection of human perception to a world composed of objects, people and various other phenomena.⁵ Because of his discussion of the objective world and our

³The twentieth-century phenomenological project to which Merleau-Ponty is linked was arguably initiated by Husserl's essay "Ideas", from his *General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (*Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*). Originally published in the *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, Freiburg (Halle: Niemeyer, 1913), 1-323. For a lucid and engaging assessment of Husserl's contribution to contemporary phenomenological philosophies, see Joseph J. Kockelmans, *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1994). For yet a larger description of the twentieth-century phenomenological project, see Christopher Macann, *Four Phenomenological Philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 1993).

⁴Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, originally published in Husserl's *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1927). Published again in 1949 (Tübingen: Niemeyer) and as *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (London: SCM Press, 1962). For a provocative study on the breadth of Heidegger's influence on philosophies this century, see Tom Rockmore, *Heidegger and French Philosophy: Humanism, Antihumanism, and Being* (London: Routledge, 1995).

⁵Such could similarly be said of the ideas contributed by Merleau-Ponty's close friend and colleague Jean-Paul Sartre. Both he and Sartre developed their individual approaches to the phenomenological project in the context of the French existentialist movement of which they formed integral parts. However, it is important to note that as much as the two shared a commitment to the phenomenological pursuit of 'being', the publication of Merleau-Ponty's decidedly anti-Communist text *Adventures of the Dialectic* in 1955 spawned a rift between he and Sartre, and calls attention to the divergent 'practical' sensibilities of each. Sartre's theories, most cogently represented in his text *L'être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943) or *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), demand activist-minded participation for viability, and are in contrast to Merleau-Ponty's less agitational attitude toward social action. For expanded discussions of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty's philosophical partnership as well as the origins of French existentialism, see these varied yet worthwhile sources: Max Charlesworth, *The Existentialists and Jean-Paul Sartre* (London: George Prior Publishers, 1976); F. H. Heineman, *Existentialism and the Modern Predicament* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1958); Eugene F. Kaelin, *An Existentialist Aesthetic: The Theories of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1966); Gregory McCulloch, *Using Sartre: An Analytical Introduction to Early*

participation in it, one may begin to understand the links made by many art historians and critics between Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology* and the Minimalist works highlighted in this appraisal.

Although the characteristics of their individual projects have varied considerably since the late 1950s, when both Morris and Serra became involved in the study and practice of art, these artists' works are also similar in significant ways. Notably, their production has maintained a repeated interest in reformulating the unique perceptual properties inherent in sculpture, or more appropriately termed for this discussion, three-dimensional compositions.⁶ Much of their interest in large-scale, multi-media works acts as a direct response to the dominant position of Abstract Expressionist painting in many museum and gallery spaces in America and abroad.⁷ Critical of the detached role of the spectator in relation to these paintings and of the way in which their 'meaning' lie hidden or imbedded in them, several Minimalist artists including Morris, Serra, Sol Le Witt and Donald Judd began making essentially primary - or so-called 'minimal' - forms which emphasise

Sartrean Themes (London: Routledge, 1994); Kurt F. Reinhardt, *The Existentialist Revolt: The Main Themes and Phases of Existentialism* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1960); Jean-Paul Sartre: *Contemporary Approaches to His Philosophy*, Hugh J. Silverman and Frederick A. Elliston, eds. (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1980). Finally, for two texts which look exhaustively at the issues mentioned, see Robert C. Solomon, *From Rationalism To Existentialism: The Existentialists and Their Nineteenth-Century Backgrounds* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985) and Stephen Priest's recent contribution, *Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge, 1998).

⁶Notable influences on Morris's and Serra's earliest work include Dada, Arte Povera, modern dance and others. For discussions of these artists' work which cover their earliest or most recent methods of production and also give extensive biographical details about Morris and Serra, see these distinguished assessments: Maurice Berger, *Labyrinthis: Robert Morris, Minimalism, and the 1960s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989); Richard Serra, Ernst-Gerhard Güse, ed. (New York: Rizzoli, 1987); Serpentine Gallery, London, *Richard Serra: Drawings*, ex. cat. (London and Düsseldorf: Serpentine Gallery together with Richter Verlag, 1992); Tate Gallery, London, *Richard Serra: Weight and Measure 1992*, ex. cat. (London and Düsseldorf: Tate Gallery together with Richter Verlag, 1992).

⁷The pre and post-war sensation of Abstract Expressionism and related styles of production have been critically surveyed in a number of worthwhile texts. See Michael Auping, *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), *Pollock and After: The Critical Debate*, Francis Francina, ed. (London: Harper and Row, 1985), Frances Morris, *Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism 1945-1955*, ex. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1993) and Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

interaction with the works themselves and the creation of meaning which results from such an engagement - an engagement taking place in the 'present tense' of real, objective space and time. Not surprisingly, such body-centred works tempted many art critics and historians to quickly read into them a general phenomenological sensibility, and in some cases a distinctively Pontean handling of issues related to human perception.⁸ Perhaps most distinguished and influential among them is the critic Rosalind Krauss, whose writings on what was then called the 'New Sculpture' can be seen to have effectively established the now accepted, phenomenology-centred discourse which surrounds it.

Yet, to reiterate a question posed earlier, to what extent is Merleau-Ponty's philosophy directly - or perhaps even indirectly - relevant to the work of Morris and Serra? It may appear as if, in light of the research and analyses of Rosalind Krauss and others, the connection between this theory and Minimalist art practice is a foregone conclusion. However, we may like to question such a state of affairs and offer an alternative account of how and why phenomenology was brought to bear on the American art scene of the 1960s and 1970s. Throughout the course of this critical appraisal of specific phenomenological 'readings' of Morris's and Serra's Minimalist works, a move will be made toward greater clarity in understanding whether or not using Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology* to interpret and explain several of these works is at all constructive, and whether it enables us to reach an improved understanding of their creation and their meaning. To do this, this discussion

⁸Many of the most recognisable names in contemporary criticism apply a general phenomenological interpretation to these artists' works. Particularly, see the comments made by Kenneth Baker in *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), Briony Fer in *On Abstract Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), Hal Foster in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), Rosalind Krauss in *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 10th ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994) and Gilles A. Tiberghien in *Land Art*, trans. Caroline Green (London: Art Data, 1995). Specific issues regarding this trend in interpretation will be discussed as part of this thesis's conclusion, where a number of these texts will be looked.

will attempt to locate alleged references to Merleau-Ponty's theory both within Morris's and Serra's works as well as in a number of their writings.

Perhaps most importantly, the concluding discussion of these artists' works seeks to question accepted critical approaches to their interpretation. Most often, as will be pointed out in relation to particular commentators, historians tend to cite Merleau-Ponty's text as an 'inspirational' document for the Minimalists. More specifically, although these artists' works at times deal only implicitly with issues relating to phenomenological philosophy, their products are predominantly discussed by critics in specific terms drawn from the *Phenomenology*. With the assistance of numerous comments made by the critic Susan Sontag, we will be able to question such criticism, criticism which appears to privilege theoretical interpretation over that which is involved in the direct experience of such works. Thus, the task of this thesis will be not only to trace the critically acknowledged, phenomenological influences upon the work of Robert Morris and Richard Serra, but also to analyse and question the appropriateness of such critical approaches to their production, approaches which often seem to suggest that the intended meaning of these Minimalist artworks is uncovered through intellection, rather than by way of first-hand experience.

Chapter 2

Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and Its Conception of Human Experience

What is this being, then, that shimmers and, as it were, glitters in the opening of the *Cogito*, yet is not sovereignly given in it or by it?¹

- Michel Foucault

Since its earliest discussion this century in the works of Edmund Husserl, the phenomenological concept of 'being' and its relation to the world - to human, experience and phenomena, or all things perceived - has undergone both radical and limited change. Culminating in both the pre-War and post-War texts of the French existential theorists, this fluctuating attitude toward the nature of human perception has drastically redefined Husserl's original search for the 'essence' or meaning of the phenomenal world; yet its writers have also maintained allegiance to this 'world-as-lived' as the context for their departure from the Cartesian concept *Cogito ergo sum*: "I think, therefore I am".² Despite those currents within philosophy itself which appear to perpetually decide which established theories (as well as theorists) are and are not critically fashionable, the modern phenomenological project most associated with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work from the 1940s to the 1960s - and particularly with his major text, the *Phenomenology of Perception* - consistently "tries to

¹Foucault, *The Order of Things*. (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), 325. Originally published as *Les Mots et les choses*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1966). Foucault's relation to the phenomenological tradition is discussed in Luc Ferry and Alain Renault, *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, trans. Mary H. S. Cattani (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990) and in Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

²René Descartes clearly proposes this in his *Discourse on the Method*, first published in 1637 as *Discours de la Méthode*: "observing that this proposition, I am thinking, therefore I exist, was so firm and sure that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I decided that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking," (Part IV, AT VI 32: CSM I 127). Reprinted in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes*, John Cottingham, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 7.

give a direct description of our experience as it is" and "offers an account of space, time and the world as we 'live' them" or "du monde <<vécus>>"³

This characteristic of his theory and its steady refinement throughout the *Phenomenology* are the areas of the modern phenomenological project which will be brought to bear most on those aspects of the Minimalist practices of Robert Morris and Richard Serra described in the 'Introduction'. In later, individual assessments of these artists' productions, notable examples of Merleau-Ponty's attitude toward the revision of bodily experience will stand *vis à vis* works by these artists which, it has been argued, expand on his phenomenological ideas, yet which are now influenced by a range of artistic considerations. However, before an in-depth discussion is undertaken, a summarised account of Merleau-Ponty's project as interpreted through selected portions of the *Phenomenology of Perception* will provide the background for future analyses. It will also allow for a later assessment of the way in which this philosophy has been applied by a number of critics to Morris's and Serra's artistic enterprises.

I. Grounding Perception in the World

From the outset, the *Phenomenology* directly expresses the context for its revision of perception; as seems obvious for a study of human activity, Merleau-Ponty's analyses are tethered to the world 'as it is', or the world as it appears and feels to us in our everyday experiences. He does, however, make clear that the 'obviousness' of this context and its "inalienable presence"⁴ have at times been obscured from our awareness

³Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*; vii, and *Phénoménologie de la perception*; ii.

⁴Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, vii.

and for several reasons. Particularly, the effects of Science - according to Merleau-Ponty, a rationalising entity removed from first-hand experience of the world - have distracted 'us' (meaning humanity, both collectively and individually) from the "direct and primitive contact"⁵ which is necessary for a pre-reflective understanding of our situation in the world. After all, he suggests:

All of my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view, or from some experience of the world with which the symbols of science would be meaningless. The whole universe of science is built upon the world as directly experienced [...].⁶

This 'particular point of view' of which Merleau-Ponty speaks is, as we shall discover, the key to understanding the *Phenomenology's* return not only to the tangible world of phenomena, but also to a world inhabited by an "incarnate subjectivity"⁷ or the individual. This is, as Merleau-Ponty states, because "[we] shall find in ourselves, and nowhere else, the unity and true meaning of phenomenology"; for the philosopher as well as the 'lay-person' or non-specialist, "[it] is less a question of counting up quotations than of determining and expressing in concrete form this *phenomenology for ourselves*".⁸ Human perception is not understood solely after the dissection of our anatomy or the description of our

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid., viii.

⁷Monika M. Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's "Phenomenology of Perception": A Guide and Commentary* (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), xv. Langer's commentary offers a clear and concise summary of the major points offered in the *Phenomenology*. This task has traditionally frustrated scholars due to the text's at times complex language, which can give a false impression of the author's essentially clear objectives.

⁸Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, viii. It is important to extend this phenomenological opportunity to the 'common' person. Although Merleau-Ponty's text was intended for a specialist audience, its scope encompasses the world not just of the philosopher (which, according to the theorist's own definition, would be one artificially isolated from the stream of the everyday) but also of anyone and everyone, since it is ultimately a world which can be shared on the most basic level.

psychological processes but is seen as the product, again, of this 'particular point of view':

I am the absolute source [of my perception], my existence does not stem from my antecedents, from my physical and social environment; instead it moves out towards them and sustains them, for I alone bring into being for myself (and therefore into being in the only sense that the word can have for me) the tradition which I elect to carry on, or the horizon whose distance from me would be abolished. . . if I were not there to scan it with my gaze.⁹

In this statement we witness Merleau-Ponty's departure from the idea that the facticity of the world follows only after the subject apprehends him or herself in the process of existing - the essence of Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum*.¹⁰ "This move", he says, "is absolutely distinct from the idealist return to consciousness [...]. Analytical reflection", or what one could call Cartesian 'hyper-reflection', "starts from our experience of the world and goes back to the subject as to a condition of possibility distinct from that of experience [...]. To this extent it ceases to remain part of our experience and offers, in place of an account, a reconstruction."¹¹ On the contrary, he contends:

The world is there before any possible analysis of mine, and it would be artificial to make it the outcome of a series of syntheses which link, in the first place sensations, then aspects of the object corresponding to difference perspectives, when both are nothing but products of analysis, with no sort of prior reality.¹²

Yet despite Merleau-Ponty's continuous hints at the revisionist nature of his project in the *Phenomenology*, his dedication to creating a unique way

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰"Descartes and particularly Kant *detached* the subject, or consciousness, by showing that I could not possibly apprehend anything unless I first of all experienced myself as existing in the act of apprehending it. They presented consciousness, the absolute certainty of my existence for myself, as the condition of there being anything at all". Ibid., ix.

¹¹Ibid., ix-x.

¹²Ibid., x.

by which the living, breathing, experiencing subject may achieve closest contact with his or her environment remains paramount. This aspect of his text, and its deliberate link to the world-as-given or as we live it, is one which can now be highlighted in its own right. This will be the main avenue of engagement between Merleau-Ponty's text and the works of Morris and Serra to be discussed shortly, during which certain questions will be put to their production. Namely, what are the characteristics of this revised world which have been allegedly interpreted by specific Minimalist propositions? How is this world supposedly made accessible to the spectator-participant through their works? How is the body's experience of such hindered or enhanced? Having posed such questions, we may now begin to give form to Merleau-Ponty's definition of this world and likewise, to describe the imperatives for this context from which his revision stems.

Continuing further into the 'Preface', Merleau-Ponty begins to expand specifically on the nature of what he terms the "field of perception" or as we have been calling it, the world in general; here he claims that this field of phenomena, or things perceived, is one "constantly filled with a play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations [...], which [we]... immediately 'place' in the world, without ever confusing them with [our] daydreams."¹³ According to this definition, the 'real' is therefore not a stale, bland or colourless interiority, but an interplay or "closely woven fabric"¹⁴ of experience. As mentioned, this field is also one which exists *a priori* any analyses we may construct in response to the given world; for, this phenomenal world "is the background from which all acts stand out, and is presupposed by them. The world is not an object such that [we] have in [our] possession the law

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all [our] thoughts and explicit perceptions."¹⁵ Perhaps more clearly, Merleau-Ponty asserts that this world is "the permanent horizon of all [our] *cogitationes*" and is "a dimension in relation to which [we are] constantly situating [ourselves]."¹⁶ It can be understood then that the fluctuating nature of human perception, as described by the author, is based almost solely on a world of varied experience which is also in flux. Linked arguably to Heraclitus' earliest thoughts on flux or perpetual change,¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty's thoughts do not spring from a world occupied only by philosophers but from a context constructed from the most basic of situations. He says:

Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world's basis; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals that world as strange and paradoxical.¹⁸

This excerpt from the *Phenomenology* emphasises those characteristics which will be brought forward into the discussion of Robert Morris and Richard Serra, and specifically the ways in which their work draws from this text. Most notably here, Merleau-Ponty calls attention to where such moments of perceptual excitement or interest may be found: in the 'everyday' or commonplace situation. More than as a simple simile to

¹⁵Ibid., xi.

¹⁶Ibid., xiii.

¹⁷Several points made by the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus (c. 521-c. 487 B.C.) characterise the world in much the same way as does Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology*. Perhaps the philosopher's most famous statement, "panta rhei" or "all things flow", can be found in his *Fragments*, a text written between c. 510-c. 480 B.C. The phenomenologist Martin Heidegger himself uses Heraclitus as a source for his 1947 essay, "Letter on Humanism", reprinted in *The Essentialist Tradition: Selected Writings*, Nino Langiulli, ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1974). For an extensive discussion of the context and work of Heraclitus, see Charles H. Kahn, *The art and thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

¹⁸Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, xiii.

highlight the 'wondrous' quality of experiencing the world,¹⁹ this description of a crackling fire can be read as indicative of the very common or basic nature of Merleau-Ponty's world concept. This is certainly not intended to indict his work for being philosophically crude or un-rigorous, but rather merely serves to emphasise the open attitude toward the significance of human experience which he maintains throughout the *Phenomenology*. By speaking about such situations, he extends philosophical importance to the everyday events of life, rather than confining the awareness of such values to trained, philosophical circles. As he first argues in the Preface, one of the primary objectives of phenomenology is to "[endow contact with the world] with a philosophical status."²⁰ Yet, as mentioned, this world is not in any way exclusive but rather 'strictly' inclusive and embraces all forms of human experience. The phenomenological enterprise must, to be faithful to the nature of the world as Merleau-Ponty understands it, strive to incorporate disparate, 'paradoxical' and heterogeneous encounters into its definition of human perception.

The whole of the *Phenomenology's* preface provides a clear description of the world which is to be investigated and revised by Merleau-Ponty throughout the text. It is one whose philosophical approach "is as painstaking as the works of Balzac, Proust, Valéry or Cézanne - by reason of the same kind of attentiveness and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will to seize the meaning of the world or of history as that meaning comes into being."²¹ This nascent meaning, he contends, "is revealed where the paths of [our] various experiences intersect, and also where [our] own and other people's

¹⁹Merleau-Ponty openly borrows this notion from the work of Edmund Husserl's assistant, Eugen Fink. Specifically, see Fink's essay "Die phänomenologische Philosophie Edmund Husserls in der gegenwärtigen Kritik", *Kantstudien* 38 (1933).

²⁰Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, vii.

²¹*Ibid.*, xxi.

intersect and engage each other like gears."²² Alternatively said, Merleau-Ponty emphasises here that the perception of the world is not isolated from the flow of life but is rather dependent upon its diversity.

The most common hallmarks of human experience which Merleau-Ponty focuses on throughout the *Phenomenology* - namely, their boundlessness and fluctuation in accord with the world-as-lived - may at times appear to be redundant or over-stated subjects of discussion. Yet bearing in mind the centrality of these premises to the whole of phenomenological philosophy itself, we will witness throughout the remainder of the text the same, repeated dedication to the 'everyday' world. In light of these points, we may likewise lay the ground for an exploration of the ways in which the *Phenomenology* has been used to describe Morris's and Serra's artworks and these pieces radical formal character.

II. Returning to Phenomena

Much as the *Phenomenology's* Preface, Merleau-Ponty's 'Introduction' continues the refinement of his notion of the perceivable world, yet now in response to what he calls the 'traditional prejudices'²³ of such empirical disciplines as science and psychology. However, unlike the Preface and the remaining bulk of the text (nearly thirteen out of its total seventeen chapters), the Introduction constitutes not so much an exposition of Merleau-Ponty's new philosophical points as it does a refutation of traditional ways of thinking about human perception - perception still being based in a world of diverse and complex experience. This section's challenges to the deeply fixed inaccuracies of empirical analysis can then be placed within the overall, revisionist project of the

²²*Ibid.*, xx.

²³This section itself entitled 'Traditional Prejudices and the Return to Phenomena'.

Phenomenology of Perception and perhaps be linked to the challenges of the 'New' art produced by Morris and Serra which, later in this appraisal, can be seen to reinterpret the function and interactive potential of various exhibition contexts.

Beginning with the notion of sensation, which he terms a 'unit of experience', Merleau-Ponty gradually constructs a difficult test both of traditional thoughts on perception and of his reader's own knowledge of works by Descartes, Kant, Husserl, Heidegger and Sartre. Yet, the steady presence in his discussion of the theme of the world-as-lived obviates many of the problems encountered by the 'lay' reader; it is by way of this common base for his analyses that Merleau-Ponty succeeds at offering an accessible and, at the same time, rich phenomenological method in his text. His comments regarding sensation are little different. Despite the explicit references to various scientific and psychological theories throughout this section, Merleau-Ponty returns to, as the ground for his theory, the world as it is both for the philosophically sophisticated as well as for the civilian. In fact, it is these very empirical theories which, he claims, have obscured what is by its nature a clear and straightforward way of contacting the phenomenal world:

At the outset of the study of perception, we find in language the notion of sensation, which seems immediate and obvious: I have a sensation of redness, of blueness, of hot or cold. It will, however, be seen that nothing could in fact be more confused, and that because they accepted it readily, traditional analyses missed the phenomenon of perception.²⁴

So how, then, is sensation defined and how is it misleading for us if we are to consider ourselves phenomenologists? Sensation, as conceived by Merleau-Ponty, may be understood as "the way in which [we are] affected and the experiencing of a state of [ourselves]"; it is "the greyness which,

²⁴*Ibid.*, 3.

when [we] close [our] eyes, surrounds [us], leaving no distance between [us] and it".²⁵ Therefore sensation does not have a detectable beginning nor an end: it is "undifferentiated, instantaneous" and "corresponds to nothing in our experience".²⁶ In one case, we can examine the way in which the experience of various colours is 'understood' and Merleau-Ponty's scenario for this analysis is particularly insightful, yet at the same time straightforward and lucid:

This red patch which I see on the carpet is red only in virtue of a shadow which lies across it, its quality is apparent only in relation to the play of light upon it, and hence as an element in a spatial configuration. Moreover, the colour can be said to be there only if it occupies an area of a certain size, too small an area not being describable in these terms.²⁷

In other words, colour is not a property of 'things' or phenomena themselves, but rather the result of our interaction with the conditions in which such entities exist. To extend this concept to the discussion of sensation, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the notion of sensation be thrown out of phenomenological inquiry altogether, for it only serves to muddy the essential clarity of his project: "Once introduced, the notion of sensation distorts any analysis of perception".²⁸ Pure sensations or impressions, as he has already mentioned, are unmeditative 'states of oneself'; reflecting upon such experiences "obscures what we thought was clear. We believed we knew what feeling, seeing and hearing were, and now these words raise problems",²⁹ because of the intellectual explanations of science and psychology which seek to dissect the

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Ibid. By this Merleau-Ponty suggests that sensation is not something 'understood' from relationships we form between ourselves and other people or things. It stems *from* us and is not merely a product of the world which is then processed by our senses.

²⁷Ibid., 4.

²⁸Ibid., 13.

²⁹Ibid., 10.

impenetrable unity of pure sensation. Returning to "perceptual experience",

we notice that science succeeds in constructing only a semblance of subjectivity: it introduces sensations which are things, just where experience shows that they are meaningful patterns; it forces the phenomenal universe into categories which make sense only in the universe of science.³⁰

The focus of Merleau-Ponty's criticism is explicit by this point in the text; it aims at those scientific, experientially-debased forms of registering the phenomenal world which take as granted that awareness of the lived 'dimension' which is elucidated by phenomenology.

In his discussion of what he calls 'association' and 'the projection of memories', Merleau-Ponty likewise scrutinises the effects of scientific analysis on the life-world and the resultant, debilitating fracture between what we 'understand' through experience and the phenomenal field in which this is discovered. To define what is meant by 'association' he offers very basic scenarios which again illustrate the straightforward nature of his project: "The 'association of ideas' which brings past experience into play can restore only extrinsic connections, and can be no more than one itself, because the original experience involved no others".³¹ In other words, here Merleau-Ponty moves against the assumption that unique and separate experiences may be linked, by way of memory, to one another over a length of time, for "an impression can never by itself be associated with another impression". He goes on to dramatise this point at some length:

If I walk along a shore towards a ship which has run aground, and the funnel or masts merge into the forest bordering on the sand dune, there will be a moment when these details suddenly become part of the ship, and indissolubly fused with it. As I approached, I did not perceive resemblances or

³⁰Ibid., 11.

³¹Ibid., 14.

proximities which finally came together to a form a continuous picture of the upper part of the ship. [...] How could I have failed to see that these pieces of wood were an integral part of the ship?

It is only by 'placing' such stimuli or things "on the same footing, that of the unique object," that some coherence, "continuity and resemblance between them is possible".³² Therefore, experiences - in order that they be connected to one another - must be spread literally over some common physical and temporal terrain.

It is at this juncture that the reader now encounters Merleau-Ponty's views on the projection of memories, for this projection of past experience into the 'living' present is a related act of association which has traditionally been explained by way of physiognomy. What is meant by this is described by our author: "It is shown that in the reading of a book the speed of the eye leaves gaps in the retinal impressions, *therefore* the sense-data must be filled out by a projection of memories"; yet according to this definition, "no sooner is the recollection of memories made possible than it becomes superfluous, since the work it is being asked to do is already done."³³ Thus the constantly fluctuating nature of the phenomenal world ultimately makes the infringing of memory on perception obsolete, and because the emergence of recollections is best explained by way of our own biology, this concept ultimately detracts from the primacy of that first-hand experience which is unhindered by analysis and objectifying theory.

Merleau-Ponty concludes this critical section of the *Phenomenology's* introduction by extending his attack on empirical 'misunderstandings' to intellectualist ones. Like the misguided concepts of sensation and association, he regards intellectualist explanations as

³²*Ibid.*, 17.

³³*Ibid.*, 19 and 19n.

repeatedly neglecting the world as it is directly experienced in favour of detached analysis. In his chapter on 'attention and judgement' he specifically focuses on the concept of attention to highlight yet another downfall of over-intellectualisation: "Attention is [...] a general and unconditioned power in the sense that at any moment it can be applied indifferently to any content of consciousness. Being everywhere barren, nowhere can it have its own purposes to fulfil."³⁴ In light of this, he continues, attention is unnecessary to an all-perceiving consciousness (i.e. a human being), for if nothing is hidden from perception at any time, the concept of attention as separate power is nonsensical. This notion can therefore be added to the list of so-called prejudices against which this section of the text makes a concerted, radical move.

Each of the traditional prejudices which Merleau-Ponty criticises - concepts generally accepted by scientific, physiognomic or intellectualist disciplines - may be seen not only as concerns for modern, phenomenological enquiries on the whole, but also as occupying an important place specifically within the revisionist structure of the *Phenomenology of Perception*. So integral are these issues to his own project that Merleau-Ponty commits his final introductory comments to reviewing his reasons for such. As he says of sensation and judgement: "we have observed that they were clear only as long as the prejudice in favour of the world was maintained";³⁵ as soon as one's direct, physical connection with the phenomenal field is disrupted or even broken by any form of intellectualisation, concepts such as sensation then quickly become objects of analysis rather than bona fide states of experience. Merleau-Ponty can be seen to argue strongly against this Cartesian view of perception which supports such analysis:

³⁴Ibid., 26.

³⁵Ibid., 53.

As soon as one tried by means of them [i.e. sensation and association], to picture consciousness in the process of perceiving, to revive the forgotten perceptual experience, and to relate them to it, they were found to be inconceivable. By dint of making these difficulties more explicit, we were drawn implicitly into a new kind of analysis, into a new dimension in which they were destined to disappear.³⁶

It is this revisionist attitude which summarises the most transitional section of Merleau-Ponty's text. Before, as seen as early as its Preface, the *Phenomenology* situates itself amongst the other phenomenological texts to which it is indebted and those alongside which it developed. Yet now by way of its Introduction, we may understand Merleau-Ponty's project as aspiring to more; not only does it form part of the established phenomenological tradition but likewise charts a new, revised direction for ontological enquiry. As he remarks:

The first philosophical act would appear to be to return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world, since it is in it that we shall be able to grasp the theoretical basis no less than the limits of that objective world, restore to things their concrete physiognomy [...]. Our task will be, moreover, to rediscover phenomena, the layer of living experience through which other people and other things are first given to us [...]; to reawaken perception [...].³⁷

At the heart of this statement is a description of the specific locus for experience, one which have come to understand throughout the opening sections of the *Phenomenology* as that of a human being or an 'incarnate subjectivity'. During the course of the text's introductory chapters, Merleau-Ponty thoroughly and lucidly describes the aims and aspirations of his project as they relate to such themes. This is why the majority of the present discussion has focused almost exclusively on these

³⁶Ibid., 53-54. Again, see p. ix of the Preface for Merleau-Ponty's comments on Descartes' position.

³⁷Ibid., 57.

portions of the *Phenomenology*. Whilst running the risk of ignoring the finer details of the later, more complex sections of the text, this concentrated analysis of the *Phenomenology*'s most general, introductory remarks on the nature of perception serves as a central focus for the upcoming appraisals of Morris's and Serra's Minimalist artworks. However, it has been a well-considered risk: for whereas the Preface and Introduction of the *Phenomenology* speak of the broad phenomenological principles under Merleau-Ponty's scrutiny, the highly specialised chapters which follow them are perhaps addressed to an audience more familiar with specific arguments and aspects of the phenomenological tradition. Thus, an analysis of these specific issues and the cases to which Merleau-Ponty often refers would require such rigorous philosophical consideration as to lay well-beyond the ambitions of this thesis.

Preparing for our pending discussions of Robert Morris and Richard Serra, we can now begin to assemble the most salient concepts of the *Phenomenology of Perception* as presented thus far, concepts with which we can assess the possible associations between Merleau-Ponty's project and Minimalist practice. Firstly, it may be crucial to remember that Merleau-Ponty conceives of the phenomenal world as "an open and indefinite multiplicity of relationships".³⁸ With this statement he asserts the possibly unequalled role of bodily experience in perception, an issue which is emphasised consistently throughout his text. At each of these points he highlights his belief that the "body is the vehicle of being in the world".³⁹ If we then combine these two elements of this philosophy, one may further suggest that, to be a 'body' in the world necessarily means to be exposed to that 'open and indefinite multiplicity' of experience which

³⁸*Ibid.*, 71.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 82.

characterises it. This point, described clearly in the earliest sections of the *Phenomenology*, is arguably the concept which binds into a cohesive project the diverse issues Merleau-Ponty raises regarding the nature of human perception. It is this point, among others to be discussed in due course, which will now be brought forward to our appraisals of the works of Robert Morris and Richard Serra in the hope that we may constructively assess the ways in which they have been connected to phenomenological philosophy and observe their artworks in terms of their particular relation to the expanded context for art practice of the 1960s and 1970s. At that close of these discussions, the very act of relating a theory as rigorous and specialised as that found in the *Phenomenology of Perception* to forms of art-making as diverse and independent as those of the Minimalists, will be given considerable critical attention. Our primary objective will then be to answer the question which was posed at the outset and which we should strive to bear in mind: namely, do Morris's and Serra's works provide sufficient justification for their critical association with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy?

Chapter 3

Robert Morris: Revising Art Practice

Underlying the Minimalist works of artist Robert Morris - those which dominated his production between 1962 and 1970 - one finds a commitment to revision similar to that found in the *Phenomenology*. Within the context of sixties art practice, one may assess Morris's propositions in terms of how they operate as formal reductions of art practice, as new orchestrations of the spaces they occupy, and as revisions of what Morris calls the traditional "structural fixes which have been imposed on art - stylistic, historical, social, economic, psychological."¹ In the *Phenomenology*, Merleau-Ponty suggests that accepting such intellectual constructs as *a priori* frustrates a "return to things themselves" or to "that world which precedes knowledge".² Throughout his essays published during the sixties, Morris criticises similar constraints. Specifically, Morris takes issue with a neglected fact of artistic production: "Whatever else art is, at a very simple level it is a way of making."³ In his essays on 'anti-form' art and on his specific approach to its production, Morris develops this position in ways which have been linked to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological project - a project described comprehensively at the outset of the *Phenomenology*.

Whereas the artist's 'anti-form' felt pieces after 1967 emphasise the centrality of their own manufacture to their status as potentially finished products, Morris's artworks before this time evidence a shifted attention. His show at the Green Gallery (Fig. 1), which ran in New York from December 1964 through January 1965, offers a collection of examples from this genre of

¹Robert Morris, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated", *Artforum*, 8, no. 8 (April 1970). Reprinted in Morris, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), 71.

²Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: 1962), ix.

³Morris, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making". Reprinted in Morris, 71.

'literal' or 'primary' structures. These works possibly highlight Morris's interest in perception-centred art experience, and in doing so, initiate the artist's own revision of those conditions for 'art making' which were seen traditionally as *a priori*. Such early works differ substantially from his later 'anti-form' pieces, both in their method of construction and in the perceptual conditions of which they form a part. Similarly, Morris's writings - published as a theoretical echo to his work - discuss these markedly different motivations. Attending to the artist's commentaries, his changing production, and their possible engagement with phenomenological motifs, Morris's Minimalist work can be seen to propose a new dialectic for the relationship between spectatorship and art practice to which we may like to compare Merleau-Ponty's attitude found in the *Phenomenology of Perception*.

I. The Spectator as a Perceiving Subject

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's text itself occupies a critical position in the context of post-war existential theory, a position of importance which, one may argue, is paralleled by Robert Morris's Minimalist work within the production of what was termed the 'New Art' during the 1960s. As Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology* offers a new version of the 'philosophy of being', it does so with an innovative clarity of purpose and a breadth of inquiry necessary for such a re-appraisal in an age marked by much social upheaval and reassessment. Morris's production is, too, characterised by such clarity: the artist's 'literal' and formally uncomplicated objects, such as those presented at the Green Gallery, emphasise lived, perceptual engagement and thereby challenge that modernist art paradigm which values additive, internal composition in painting and sculpture, as well as its purely optical

and cognitive effects.⁴ In constructing a dialogue between the artist's early Minimalist work and his writings of this period, we begin to relate several concepts from the *Phenomenology* to Morris's production and to observe the possible ways in which he may have been influenced by this rich philosophical theory.

When looking to Morris's essays published in *Artforum* during 1966, the artist's interest in the phenomenological notion of an irreducible, pre-intellectual experience is arguably demonstrated in his approach towards production. Similarly, interpretations of his early Minimalist sculptures support the view that Morris also utilised such ideas for these artworks. As has been highlighted, Merleau-Ponty discusses in his own text the necessity for perception "to return to things themselves...to return to that world which precedes knowledge". Bound to this revised approach to the world of objects is a "perceptual field...made up of 'things' and the 'spaces between things'".⁵ Returning to his original French text, we find a more expansive description of this newly appraised context: "Notre champs perceptif est fait de <<choses>> et de <<vides entre les choses>>".⁶ Articulated in this way, the field of perception is characterised as an avenue of awareness punctuated by tangible forms and the 'voids' between them. In his essay "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1", Morris draws attention to the physical separation defining each phenomenon (or object) amongst other phenomena - a distinction germane to this concept of perception. Using a statement by Goethe which is kindred to this idea, Morris initiates a discussion which then extends throughout his essay and

⁴The critics Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried discuss the fundamental importance of such inter-related constructions to modern production in their respective essays "Recentness of Sculpture", in *American Sculpture of the Sixties*, ex cat (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1967), 24-26, and "Art and Objecthood", *Artforum*, 5, no. 10 (June 1967), 12-23.

⁵Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 15.

⁶Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie*, 23.

subsequent "Notes on Sculpture": "What comes into appearance must segregate in order to appear."⁷

This isolation of objects within a visually un-inflected environment translates into Morris's *Untitled* works as, what Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried would term, an effect of 'presence'.⁸ Negatively defined by these critics as the visual and perceptual inexhaustibility of Minimalist art, presence in these 'untitleds' draws a spectator's awareness towards the edges of Morris's objects. This conscious orchestration of products is a positive attempt by the artist to place his work within an exhibition context, mindful of the nexus of conditions affecting a viewer's engagement - those lying outwith or on the surface of these objects, such as gallery space and the proximity, scale and shape of the pieces. Returning to Morris's exhibition of early 'minimal' works at the Green Gallery, one observes how the artist further elaborates on these perception-based concepts. The exhibition featured pieces designed in 1964 expressly for the Green Gallery: *Untitled (Cloud)* - a modified form of his 1962 original-, *Untitled (Corner Piece)*, *Untitled (Wall/ Floor Slab)*, *Untitled (Boiler)*, *Untitled (Corner Beam)*, *Untitled (Floor Beam)* and *Untitled (Table)*. This collection of works operates in tandem with the perceptual elements of its exhibition context. The viewer's participation in such works is not one privately confined to the mind by some mode of intellectualisation as it is in the necessary re-ordering of, or reflection upon, a modernist work's internal composition as suggested by Greenberg. Instead, Morris's propositions direct attention to their own physical limits in the gallery, and consequently to that liminal space which both defines their separation from one another as well as their organisation in a common site.

⁷Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1", *Artforum*, 4, no. 6 (February 1966), 42-44. Reprinted in Morris, 1.

⁸In their aforementioned essays, both Greenberg and Fried characterise this notion of 'presence' as a conscious (but negative) gesture against their definition of art as such. In contrast, one could argue that Morris uses a positive, phenomenological interpretation of this 'presence' to revise the traditional, binary relationship between subject and object or spectator and artwork.

Such a conscious orchestration may emphasise, as does Merleau-Ponty in the *Phenomenology*, that "the world is not what [we] think, but what [we] live through."⁹ Morris makes a similar point in his "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1", and further expands on this condition throughout his essays of the late sixties. In a comment regarding the general nature of 'new' sculpture in the sixties, like that of emerging Minimalists Donald Judd and Carl Andre, Morris contends that the "experience of [these] solids establishes. . . fact".¹⁰

Morris's inclusion of a modified version of the 1962 *Untitled (Cloud)* at the Green Gallery show is, perhaps, an important decision to consider in its own right. The first English translation of *Phénoménologie de la perception*, published in the United States and Great Britain in 1962, was released near the time of Morris's first so-called 'Minimalist' works.¹¹ Of course, this fact alone does not substantiate any conclusions made about the direct influence of the *Phenomenology* on his early Minimalist work, but it helps to place this text within a collection of possible sources which may have influenced a generation of 'New' artists. Yet this evidence, in conjunction with a phenomenological interpretation of other works exhibited in the New York show and with the first publication of Morris's writings in 1966, suggests that the artist's inclusion of this *Untitled (Cloud)* at the Green Gallery may offer an example of his earliest engagement with phenomenological concerns like those found in the *Phenomenology*. Among his revisions of perception, Merleau-Ponty's characterisation of the perceived world as a 'system' whose "experiences. . . intersect and engage each other like gears"¹² may be likened to Morris's systems of art objects. To illustrate this, several points made by the

⁹Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, xvi.

¹⁰Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1". Reprinted in Morris, 7.

¹¹Similar plywood works constructed by Morris in 1962, namely *Untitled (Slab)*, *Untitled (Frame)* and *Barrier*, further support the claim that the publication of the *Phenomenology* in translation the same year proved a tremendous influence on the course of his sculptural project.

¹²Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, xx.

artist in his "Notes on Sculpture" essays bear repeating, for they construct a telling commentary on the complex motivations behind Morris's production.

In "Part 2" of his "Notes", Morris goes on to suggest that one such 'gear' at work in this perceptual machine of art objects is the viewer's awareness of scale - a concept he discusses using terms drawn from the *Phenomenology*. He proposes that "[in] the perception of relative size, the human body enters into the total continuum of sizes and establishes itself as a constant on that scale."; perhaps more importantly, "one knows immediately what is smaller and what is larger than himself."¹³ Morris's specific attention in this essay to one's instantaneous awareness of an object's scale translates itself into his work (such as that exhibited at the Green Gallery) by way of his deliberate organisation of the exhibition space.

Looking again at this collection of 'untitleds', one sees how Morris has spectators navigate through a gauntlet of his objects, and how they are literally forced to recognise the physical presence of such 'things' both in relation to each other and in relation to their own bodies. This literal invasion of 'one's own space' is also an element of Merleau-Ponty's call for the perceptual reduction of lived experience. As he describes in the *Phenomenology*: "Seeking the essence of consciousness will [...] not consist in developing the *Wortbedeutung* of consciousness and escaping from existence [...] it will consist in rediscovering my actual presence to myself."¹⁴ By using the term *Wortbedeutung* as defined in Husserl's discussion of the phenomenological 'essence' of lived experience, Merleau-Ponty suggests that the basic, pre-reflective operation of perception cannot be replaced by such intellectualised searches for its meaning. Rather, the experience of the 'self-in-the-world' must be reduced to one's bare perception of material phenomena through a physical relationship to it. Merleau-Ponty argues that the problem

¹³Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2", *Artforum*, 5, no. 2 (October 1966), 20-23. Reprinted in Morris, 11.

¹⁴Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, xv.

with the traditional analyses of Descartes and Kant is that they were simply "idealist [returns] to consciousness" which "detached the subject", or locus of perception, from its physical situation within a field of objects.¹⁵ This retreat into the mind rather than into an inspection of the world frustrates him further: "Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world's basis; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like the sparks of a fire".¹⁶ Our ability to potentially relate Merleau-Ponty's notion of 'forms' as phenomena to Morris's production suggests that both of their projects are based similarly on 'systems of objects'.

A provocative characteristic of Morris's early Minimalist works - one which will be used later in distinguishing its motivations from those of the artist's anti-form propositions - is their relation to the avenues for perceptual revision offered in the *Phenomenology*. Looking again at Morris's Green Gallery show, this element of his work can be explained in greater detail through a close inspection of how such propositions affect one another as well as the viewer. The large, 'public' nature of these *Untitled* works emphasises Morris's ambition to redress the traditionally private reception of art within a gallery. His 1966 essay "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2" echoes this motivation: "While specific size is a condition that structures one's response in terms of the more or less public or intimate, enormous objects in the class of monuments elicit a far more specific response to size *qua* size [...]. The awareness of scale is a function of the comparison made between that constant, one's body size, and the object."¹⁷ This drive to reposition the spectator's body within a complex system of perception may echo Merleau-Ponty's belief that "the relations between subject and [perceived] world are not strictly bilateral".¹⁸ Where Greenberg and Fried would see scale as

¹⁵*Ibid.*, ix.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, xiii.

¹⁷Morris, "Notes on Sculpture, Part 2". Reprinted in Morris, 13.

¹⁸Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, ix.

merely inducing a 'theatrical presence', Morris uses the towering or expansive proportions of each *Untitled* work to revise and highlight the effects of their mutual situation on the viewer's awareness of such. Whereas the explicitly 'visual' nature of previous art production, such as that of the Abstract Expressionists of the 1950s and 60s, can be to illicit a self-reflexive response from the spectator, each work presented at the Green Gallery frustrates any private reception which does not acknowledge these objects' function as part of a literal, physical condition. If one were to approach Morris's *Untitled (Cloud)* and *Untitled (Corner Piece)* (Fig. 2), their existence would seem inescapable. However, this is not the case if when a work is viewed from a remote standpoint. To avoid this 'literal' situation is to not enter the gallery space at all. As Merleau-Ponty might say, the viewer, or rather the participant, cannot withdraw from this art 'world' without overthrowing the perception of it altogether.

Extending the phenomenological notion that a viewer exists 'in-the-world', Morris's 'untitleds' allude to the spectator's body through the use of abstract human proportions and thereby strengthen the possibility of a personally engaging, perceptual experience of the work. In looking at these pieces, one could argue that they bear little resemblance to the human body with all of its characteristic, fleshy idiosyncrasies. However, the proportions of Morris's work at the Green Gallery are such that his *Cloud* appears to be one designed to intimately hover above only a single participant or a small number of people at one particular time. This cloud-like form also appears to have descended mid-way down the gallery solely to meet the spectator in a space shared by similar objects. Likewise, Morris's *Untitled (Floor Beam)* of 1964 'connects' with the visitor near hip-level, catalysing an immediate, sensual dialogue between the object and the body's awareness of it.¹⁹

¹⁹ As part of a similar appraisal, Kimberly Paice suggests that these works "allow a dialogue both with the architectural site and the viewer." This comment can also be placed in relation to Merleau-Ponty's desire for a 'return to objects' necessarily 'in-the-world', and not

In addition to the works constructed for the Green Gallery, pieces made the following year also promote the issue of a spectator-participant's kinaesthetic interaction with objects which Morris focuses on throughout his earlier plywood works. The artist's *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)* (Fig. 3), first fabricated in January 1965, constitutes a continuation of this sensibility and a clever rendering of an extract from the *Phenomenology*. As do several of his Green Gallery propositions, each of the four cubic units comprising the *Untitled* (constructed in sizes ranging from 53.3 cm to 91.4 cm per side, depending upon the exhibition space) would meet an average, adult spectator somewhere between his or her knees and hips.²⁰ Once again this suggests that Morris specifically devised these forms to account for the human scale of the space in which they are situated. However, apart from this important perceptual consideration Morris can perhaps be seen responding to a phrase from Merleau-Ponty's text in his choice of materials for the *Untitled*. As stated in the *Phenomenology*:

To see is to enter a universe of beings which *display themselves*, and they would not do this if they could not be hidden behind each other or behind me. In other words: to look at an object is to inhabit it, and from this habitation to grasp all things in terms of the aspect which they present to it. But in so far as I see those things too, they remain abodes open to my gaze, and, being potentially lodged in them, I already perceive from various angles the central object of my present vision. Thus every object is the mirror of all others.²¹

Each of Morris's cubes - small boxes made from wood, then laminated with reflective Plexiglas - may be seen as completely 'displayed'. As participants linger around the *Untitled* their reflections can also be said 'to inhabit it': legs and feet normally attached to the spectator's body now appear dislocated and

withdrawn from its physical conditions. See *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem*, ex. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1994), 170.

²⁰To encompass all possible viewing audiences we could also assume that these forms would meet any spectator-participant, regardless of their own 'dimensions', in such a way as to visibly reflect at least some portion of their bodies.

²¹Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 68.

'lodged' in these cubes themselves. Like the effects of reflection, Morris's use of seriality or multiple forms in his work may emphasise the interaction between each of its elements and the spectator's role as an organising subject in these cohesive systems of phenomena. His *Untitled (Battered Cubes)* (Fig. 4) from 1965 formally carries forward an idea initiated in the *Mirrored Cubes* and later addressed in the first part of his "Notes on Sculpture". The importance of a work's "single, immediately grasped and constant shape . . . was its capacity to subsume all other qualities or properties of the object into a 'unitary' form", or as Morris suggests: "If the predominant, hieratic nature of the unitary form functions as a constant, all these particularizing [sic] relations of scale, proportion, etc., are not thereby cancelled. Rather they are bound more cohesively and individually together."²²

However, Morris does not encourage the experience of unified form solely in relation to works composed of several distinct elements. His *Untitled (Ring with Light)* (Fig. 5) of 1965-66 - yet another example of Morris's use of painted plywood - operates perhaps more subtly. Described by Michael Fried as having "an inner, even secret life",²³ the piece may be seen - if one follows Fried's line of criticism - to affect a viewer by means of an intangible, theatrical presence. Yet this interpretation of the *Untitled* which fixes unnecessarily upon Morris's use of a glowing, fluorescent light source may be said to lay too much emphasis on the anthropomorphic qualities of this illumination. In light of our knowledge of Morris's production thus far, such an orchestration within the work itself would seem arguably 'out of character'. Instead of as an 'inner presence', the light could be described as one welding together the *Untitled*'s two semicircular units. In other words, the glow which bisects the work does not emanate from an emerging life-force like a chick

²²Paice comments and quotes Morris's "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1" in *Robert Morris: The Mind/Body Problem* (ex. cat.), 172.

²³Fried, "Art and Objecthood". Reprinted in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1968); 129.

hatching from its shell, but rather may suggest from the flame of a welder's acetylene light or, although somewhat fantastic, perhaps a type of luminescent glue. Such an interpretation would be far more in keeping with Morris's Minimalist works such as his structures made for the Green Gallery and his *Mirrored Cubes* from 1965. Each of these pieces, however different their forms may be, ask to be experienced as wholes or as cohesive entities. The effective fusing together of two units in *Ring with Light* could likewise be said to constitute a formal consideration extending from Morris's interest in perception. As Merleau-Ponty contends, perception is the product of "unified experience" and all acts within it can be generalised as forms of "unifying activity".²⁴ Thus, in attempting to give some conclusive characterisation of this and earlier works, one could again argue that Morris's production 'elects to carry on' some form of phenomenological tradition by emphasising that art-experience stems explicitly from a spectator's "own particular point of view".²⁵

As early as 1962 and decidedly from late 1964 onward, Morris can be seen focusing his production on reformulating the complex organisation of exhibition space, its relation to the viewer, and the spectator-participant's role as a mobile, perceiving subject. In doing so, he radically redefines the traditional, detached character of this individual amidst a field of objects or phenomena - a position often regarded as essential to any experience of works themselves. Yet within Morris's systems of phenomena, another participant can be identified - the artist himself, and it is with such a focus that one may now come to terms with several of his later Minimalist artworks and the ways in which he may have further utilised phenomenological concepts.

²⁴Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 238.

²⁵*Ibid.*, viii.

II. The Act of Making and the Artist as a Perceiving Subject

Robert Morris's essay "Anti Form" of 1968 represents a distinct and vocal re-direction of the artist's motivations seen before in his written commentaries and his formal revisions of the spectator-object relationship. As early as 1966, Morris's Minimalist work increasingly engaged itself with a variety of materials strikingly different from the smooth, opaque media of matte paint and plywood used exhaustively at the Green Gallery and as early as 1962. This change in the formal character of his work may itself be a key to understanding Morris's redirected interest in phenomenology and its importance for a new dialectic in art practice. As Morris's early propositions, such as *Untitled (Cloud)* and *Untitled (Floor Beam)*, establish an ambiguous and complex perceptual dynamic between viewer and work, his later mesh constructions and anti-form pieces expand on this theme. In addition to his concern for a participant's perceptual experience, Morris's products demonstrate his own awareness of how an artist interacts with both materials and space. This shift in production may reflect a new understanding of phenomenological philosophy. In place of his former general, perceptual play between objects and subject, Morris could be seen taking Merleau-Ponty's example of stripping human experience down to its barest element (i.e. perception of the world) and transforming it into an isolation of that element most characteristic of art practice itself: the process of making.

Among those propositions which demonstrate this new attitude, Morris's mesh works produced from 1966 onward arguably show the artist's combination of perceptual theory and perhaps Merleau-Ponty's ideas for the revision of such. Inspecting Morris's *Untitled (Quarter-Round Mesh)* (Fig. 6) from 1966 and *Untitled (Slung Mesh)* (Fig. 7) from 1968, it is possible to describe how the artist may have translated into form Merleau-Ponty's refusal of differences between the nature of 'inner and outer man'. In the

Phenomenology, he specifically contends: "Truth does not inhabit only the 'inner man', or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world [...]"²⁶ One can infer from this statement that Merleau-Ponty believes quite literally that, in the process of perception, 'one sees what one gets'. Here again we return to the *Phenomenology's* appraisal of existence versus essence, for before any mode of conscious inquiry into its meaning, the material facticity of an object asserts itself. As is perhaps seen in Merleau-Ponty's text, Morris also obviates any concrete distinctions between inner and outer space in his steel *Untitled (Quarter-Round Mesh)*. The woven-metal structure of the pieces complicates and challenges notions of inside and outside. As a spectator interacts with the *Quarter-Round Mesh* by moving around and near it, its hollow centre chamber, as delineated by the boxing of the mesh, changes in appearance. From one viewpoint, it appears to simply mark the absence of any material; when seen from another angle, closer to the gallery floor, this hollowed portion takes-on a distinct, geometric form of its own. Likewise, in approaching Morris's *Slung Mesh* a spectator has no steady, perceptual hold on either the interior or exterior regions of the work. Where common sense or logic tell us that any object, according to its very structure, *should* have both inner and outer limits, actual perception refuses these presumptions. This work can at times seem both hollow and solid, as well as light and heavy. The perceptual ambiguities of these works frustrate, as they do in Morris's earlier works from the Green Gallery, a spectator's withdrawal from the exhibition environment.²⁷ As a revision of the traditionally detached and reflective position of the viewer, Morris insists that, in order to

²⁶Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, xi.

²⁷Additionally, the artist's 1969 work *Untitled (U-Channels)* and two aluminium *Untitled (I-Beams)* from 1967 and 1968 challenge a fixed awareness of their inner and outer spaces. As also seen in both his *Quarter-Round Mesh* and *Slung Mesh*, Morris's *U-Channels* exploit the effects of aluminium moiré to confuse the perception of their own substantiality. In his *I-Beams*, Morris offers works whose open, frame-like structures likewise make them difficult to describe as solid objects.

experience objects as perceptually multivalent, a person or subject must participate with them both visually *and* physically.

This slippery, perceptual engagement with Morris's work is heightened by his use of steel and aluminium meshes as it is by the use of semi-transparent materials in constructions such as *Untitled (Nine Fibreglass Sleeves)* (Fig. 8) from 1967. The membranous quality of these media make any conviction of within and without tentative at best.²⁸ Similarly, the artist's *Untitled (Fibreglass Cloud)* (Fig. 9), also from 1967, emphasises the ambiguous, hazy materiality unique to this material. Revising the cloud form first used in 1962 and again in 1964, Morris now creates an object - suspended from the ceiling by nylon threads - which because of its medium looks as touchable as a pillow yet as ephemeral as fog. In addition to the perceptual lottery initiated by Morris's work, the use of visually porous materials calls specific attention to the means of these works' own fabrication. In doing so, Morris revises his position as an art practitioner through distilling his products, such as these 'untitleds', to the basic facts of their own making and his role in such making. This shift from an emphasis on the participant's experience to Morris's interaction with the work can be said to relate to Merleau-Ponty's own reduction of the properties unique to his phenomenological enterprise. The *Phenomenology* begins with such a statement of intent, and it is this specific motivation voiced by Merleau-Ponty which Morris may have used as a model for his continuous revision of art's formal dialectic.

In an essay from 1970, Morris specifically seemingly adopts the structure of the *Phenomenology*'s introductory chapters and Merleau-Ponty's revisionist dialectic.²⁹ As Merleau-Ponty describes the need for philosophical

²⁸In the case of the works mentioned here, the fibreglass (prepared for Morris as well as Eva Hesse by Aegis Fabricatorss in New York) is characterised by what seems a raw, lucent finish. Alternatively Morris used this fibreglass as a base which he then painted over, as in his *Untitled (Stadium)* of 1967, whose appearance harks back to the flat, buffed surfaces of his numerous plywood pieces.

²⁹See Morris, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making".

revision as the basis of a 'return to phenomena', Morris assumes a similar, critical posture relating to the specific context of sixties art production. Morris's essay "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making" offers a written account of the artist's motivations since his early Minimalist work of 1962. Before the publication of this essay, Morris's anti-form 'style', like that seen in his *Untitled (Tangle)* (Fig. 10) of 1967, primarily attempts to visually and perceptually isolate the most characteristic element of art practice: the act of making. Through concentrating on the practical, tactile aspects of this activity, such as his choice of materials and his interaction with the gallery space, Morris uses a philosophy-specific appraisal of perception, while remaining conscious of a viewer's own experience of the work. Morris's *Tangle* engages with the viewer both as an object to inspect visually as well as a physical presence which shares and interacts with one's personal space. Yet perhaps greater than this perceptual activity, Morris's attention to the object's unique, sensuous materiality highlights the artist's own physical experience in its making and the products of this making. In approaching this felt piece - with the word 'felt' offering a curious double entendre - a viewer is well-aware of how it operates within the gallery space and how the work calls attention to its physical 'presentness'; climbing up the wall, as would some species of ivy or creeping vine, Morris's *Tangle* delineates gallery space from a participant's space and then combines the two by pushing itself out toward the viewer, thus forcing a physical and perceptual reaction. Similarly, the artist's *Untitled (Tangle)* (Fig. 11), also from 1967, appears to be commandeering the room's floor space and perhaps growing into its own foundation. These works' loose tendrils of felt and untidy appearances suggest that they 'out of control' or have become over-grown, and thus threaten to physically infringe upon a participant.³⁰ In his 1968 essay entitled

³⁰Some of Morris's later 'felts', such as his *Untitled (Six Legs)* of 1969, cling more closely to the walls on which they are mounted. However, an excess of material invariably extends along

"Anti Form", Morris comments on the basis for these works: "The focus on matter and gravity as means [for production] results in forms that were not projected in advance. Considerations of ordering are necessarily casual and imprecise and unemphasized [...]. Disengagement with preconceived enduring forms and orders for things is a positive assertion."³¹ By creating works whose contingency is wholly dependent upon viewer interaction and environmental factors (i.e. gravity and exhibition space), Morris revises the status of the art object whose significance was traditionally predetermined or projected onto it in advance of any perceptual participation. As Merleau-Ponty suggests about the projection of the *a priori*: "traditional [philosophical] analyses missed the phenomenon of perception."³²

In a shift away from what was predominantly a redressing of the viewer's perceptual experience, Morris's work from 1968-1969 isolates his own manipulation of materials and the perceptual processes inherent in art-making as a product in itself. Witnessed as early as in his *Steam* (Fig. 12) from 1967, Morris can be seen allowing the nature of his chosen media to dictate the over-all, completed form of his work. In this piece, installed permanently in 1974 at Western Washington University, USA, Morris organises a series of steam outlets beneath a bed of stones so that a continuous flow of mist will glide across the face of the rocks. Its extremely nebulous character reinforces the shift in Morris's work from using stable to highly unpredictable media so as to emphasise their very basic or elemental nature. This reduction is specifically articulated in his essay "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making", where Morris possibly responds to the structure of Merleau-Ponty's introduction to the *Phenomenology* in order to revise traditional practice which

the floorboards in such a way as to potentially entangle a spectator's feet. For extended discussions of the artist's later felt works, see *Robert Morris: Recent Felt Pieces and Drawings*, ex. cat. (Hannover: Kunstverein, 1997) and Pepe Karmel, *Robert Morris: The Felt Works*, ex. cat. (New York: Grey Art Gallery and Study Centre, 1989).

³¹Morris, "Anti Form", *Artforum*, 6, no. 8 (April 1968), 33-35. Reprinted in Morris, 46.

³²Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 3.

has occasionally obscured the evidence of an artist's activity from the products themselves. Morris begins: "A variety of structural fixes have been imposed on art [...]. Whatever else art is, at a very simple level it is a way of making [...] a close look at the nature of art making remains to be undertaken."³³ Whilst quoting a collection of contemporary sources to support his various comments on the concept of 'art as behaviour', Morris may again look to the *Phenomenology*. Merleau-Ponty initiates his own discussion of the dangers of fixes imposed on philosophy by entitling his introduction "Traditional Prejudices and the Return to Phenomena". Perhaps like Morris's essay, this introductory section acts as a manifesto for all subsequent remarks regarding his revision of perception (or as in Morris's case, the re-appraisal of art practice). This introduction describes Merleau-Ponty's motivations for exploring perception within ourselves in order to "understand sense experience" of the objective world.³⁴ Morris's essay also asserts the need to inspect the basic process of art production itself in order to obviate all other intellectualised (and aestheticised) constructs attached to it. As he states: "Much attention has been focused on the analysis of the content of art making - its end images - but there has been little attention focused on the significance of the means."³⁵ Adding to this and using a vocabulary not unfamiliar to phenomenological theory, Morris continues: "This extended profile [of art making] is composed of a complex of interactions involving factors of bodily possibility, the nature of materials and physical laws, the temporal dimensions of process and perception, as well as resultant static images."³⁶

Among those anti-form, process-based works which best illustrate Morris's revised motivations for production, the artist's *Continuous Project*

³³Morris, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making". Reprinted in Morris, 71.

³⁴Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 12.

³⁵Morris, "Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making". Reprinted in Morris, 75.

³⁶Ibid.

Altered Daily (Fig. 13), executed between 1 - 22 December, 1969, stands-out as his most exhaustive appraisal of a perception-sensitive approach to art-making. Expanding upon earlier 'free-form' propositions such as *Untitled (Threadwaste)* (Fig. 14) and *Untitled (Dirt)* (Fig. 15), both from 1968, this project may represent Morris's extended engagement with phenomenological ideas. As seen in his work since 1962 and in his related essays, Morris's initial motivation for production can be seen as a conscious re-assessment and complication of the spectator/object relationship. Now, as witnessed in both this multi-part project presented at Leo Castelli's New York 'Warehouse' and his later texts, the artist's attention is seen to have shifted toward an awareness of his own experience. Morris continuously developed this work on-site at the Castelli gallery over the course of 21 days, during which time he added, manoeuvred and flung a variety of raw materials within the warehouse space, including asbestos, clay, earth, cotton, grease, water, felt, threadwaste, and electric lights. Similar to the characteristics of *Threadwaste* and *Dirt*, this piece's multiple layers and rather transient nature emphasise Morris's own changing interaction with the materials themselves. Not only does a viewer's experience of the piece become a challenge for their attention span and a constant re-situating of the self in relation to it, but the artist's 'hand' or presence in this process is evident through the work's physical metamorphoses. This aspect of the work, complimented by the artist's writings and their continuous engagement with ideas relating to perception, suggest that Morris not only may have been aware of phenomenological theory but also of Merleau-Ponty's work itself. These changed motivations, apparent in both his production and essays after 1967, are in their own right a form of revision. From re-appraising the conditions of a spectator's perception in his early Minimalist work, Morris goes on to produce work refining his own notions about art making. As the act of making is the base for all art practice (and therefore the result of a reduction of such), Morris's

Minimalist work during from the 1960s could be understood to mirror a number of the same issues which are central to the contemporary phenomenological enterprise.

At the base of the *Phenomenology of Perception* is a reduction of human experience bound to an objective world, or as Merleau-Ponty terms it, to a world of phenomena. This text sets forth such experiences as its subject of revision in order to repair those traditional prejudices against phenomenological philosophy which had obscured the fact that perception occurs in a necessarily pre-cognitive and un-reflective state of being. These issues bear resemblance to those addressed in the work and writings of Robert Morris, yet they relate now to the context of American art in the 1960s and specifically to an artistic sphere formerly dominated by the successes of the Abstract Expressionists. Morris's revision of art practice not only attempts to reduce all that is synthetic in a viewer's reception of art, such as private intellectualisation which takes place once-removed from the work itself, but also articulates this through his own appraisal of what it means to produce such work. This possible phenomenological sensibility dominates Morris's entire production from 1962 until 1970. Additionally, the artist's writings from this period attempt to revise contemporary art criticism and to reclaim it from those critics, such as Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, who were physically, and thus phenomenologically, detached from art making itself. Bearing this evidence in mind, one can see Morris's commitment not only to the revision of how works of art may influence or perhaps even determine their exhibition contexts, but also the commitment throughout his disparate and provocative production to redefine both his own and the viewer's understanding of their unique perceptual situation in the world.

Chapter 4

Richard Serra: Diversifying Art Experience

Scientific thinking, a thinking which looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general, must return to the 'there is' which underlies it; to the site, the soil of the sensible and opened world such as it is in our life and for our body [...].¹

-Maurice Merleau-Ponty

In this comment taken from one of his later essays entitled 'Eye and Mind', Merleau-Ponty opposes once again the Cartesian separation between the mind (which we may term the 'cogito') and the world of people and things (both termed 'phenomena') which the mind inhabits via the body - a task concerning Merleau-Ponty through the whole of the *Phenomenology*. As previously discussed, he similarly argues that the subject or what one could call 'the perceiver' is not a pure thinker, as Descartes supposes in his *Meditations*, but is rather "incarnate subjectivity"² or an embodied consciousness. Yet greater still, this statement emphasises the limitless character of the domain of perception addressed by phenomenology; 'the soil of the sensible' or 'opened world' is in contrast to Descartes' world from which he has "*detached* the subject, or consciousness" and where the subject "could not possibly apprehend anything else as existing unless (it) first of all experienced (itself) in the act of apprehending it".³ Bringing together these two ideas - that the embodied, perceiving subject is also one who navigates through a complex

¹Merleau-Ponty, 'Eye and Mind', trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, James M. Edie, ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 160-1. Quoted in Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's "Phenomenology of Perception": A Guide and Commentary*, (London: Macmillan Press, 1989), xi. Originally written in 1960, Merleau-Ponty's essay was published posthumously.

²Langer, xv.

³Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), ix.

and pre-reflective world of sensation and experience - Merleau-Ponty proposes that human perception can only be assessed once immersed into the everyday or as he says, 'such as it is in our life'. In other words, his position in the *Phenomenology* is one "in favour of a concern with the world of our actual, lived experience" and not with the comparatively abstract investigations of Cartesian philosophy - an approach which ultimately "[masks] the origin of reflection".⁴

Bringing Merleau-Ponty's attitude toward the inexhaustible world to bear once again on Minimalist art practice, a markedly different discussion from that found in the preceding chapter may now develop around how the artist Richard Serra relates to such phenomenological themes and around his approach to the creation of diverse artworks which emphasise the spectator-object relationship. Such a survey will also be joined by a reading of several of the artist's writings which were produced alongside these works between 1966 and 1980. Stemming from this analysis, we may not only explore the extent to which Serra's project can be spoken about in phenomenological terms, but we can also elaborate on his work's relation to the wider context and concerns of the Minimalist 'movement' at that time.

I. Formal Diversity In Serra's Early Work

The disparate character of Richard Serra's early sculpture from between 1966 and 1970 could be seen as an express product of the artist's interest in laying bare the activity of art making and its physical effects on both artist and viewer alike, much as was discovered in Robert Morris's later works such as his *Dirt* (Fig. 15) of 1968 and *Continuuous Project Altered Daily* (Fig. 13) of 1969. Through highlighting his propositions' own

⁴Langer, xiv and xv.

means of production, Serra can be seen fostering a physical awareness of media and the artist's movement as the main point of contact between his work and its audience. This trend in his production could be interpreted as a phenomenological awareness similar to themes discovered in Merleau-Ponty's text, and one which can be explored in greater depth through a reading of Serra's 1967-1968 writing, "Verb List".⁵ In what could be loosely called a journal of activity and movement, Serra reduces and condenses the process of art-making to a list of more than one hundred actions and their effects upon his chosen materials or his artworks themselves:

| | |
|-------------|--------------------------------|
| to split | to spread |
| to cut | to hang |
| to sever | to collect |
| to drop | of tension |
| to remove | of gravity |
| to simplify | of entropy [...]. ⁶ |

Each of his entries in this so-called diary helps contribute to an overall sense of the artist's method of working. The list also emphasises the heterogeneity of his 'art-process' which specifically calls attention to Serra's shifting from activity to activity and perhaps from material to material during production. Yet, although it could be termed a rather conceptual list which encourages a reader to envisage or mentally recreate Serra's activities, one also begins by way of this list to understand of the artist's activity as an extremely tactile and physically engaging process. One could therefore argue that this writing attempts to operate on a somewhat phenomenological level; rather than by way of various intellectual analyses, Serra offers the reader a view of his work which accentuates its sentient or tangible qualities. To highlight this text's phenomenological

⁵First published in "The New Avant-Garde, Issues for the Art of the Seventies" (n.p., 1972). Reprinted in Richard Serra, *Writings/Interviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 3-4.

⁶Ibid., 3.

tenor, it may prove helpful to reassert a suggestion from the *Phenomenology*: "The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible."⁷ Although it would be dangerously speculative to securely link Merleau-Ponty's text to Serra's writing solely on the basis of their similarity, we may nevertheless like to begin reading *phenomenologically* several of the artist's works made between 1966 and 1970. Just as Serra's "Verb List" magnifies the activity and experience of art production in its own right, many of the artist's early 'minimal' artworks can also be described as emphasising their own materiality as a means by which a spectator may enter into a complex physical and perceptual dialogue with these diverse forms and their varied exhibition contexts.

Serra's earliest, rough-hewn pieces such as his *Doors* (Fig. 16) of 1966-1967, could be interpreted as the formal products of those activities which the artist documents in his "Verb List", and could be linked to phenomenology's body-centred theories of perception. Much as Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology* emphasises, Serra's artworks highlight the centrality of the body to perception, not simply as a mediator between mind and world but as the origin of connections made between it and objective experience. Serra may be seen illustrating this concept most specifically through his choice of materials and the methods by which he forms and manipulates such media toward exhibitable 'ends'. For example, the artist's *Doors* have a distinct, coarse texture which is not only visible but also invites touch. Although such contact is rarely possible within traditional art spaces, Serra's use of rubber and fibreglass here may not only call attention to the artist's 'splitting', 'severing' and 'spreading' of these media but may also elicit from spectators a similar engagment

⁷Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, xvi-xvii.

with the materials, although it is not traditionally allowed by museums or galleries. The body's role in these works is one which we can see advocated in Merleau-Ponty's text:

Consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body. A movement is learned when the body has understood it, that is, when it has incorporated it into its 'world', and to move one's body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call, which is made upon it independently of any representation.⁸

The artist's rubber and fibreglass forms, leaning against the walls of the gallery space, can be understood as 'doors' if one looks for the underlying structures which Serra has used. However, the physical lure to be touched which is arguably sent out by these materials acts first upon the body and could be seen as "made upon it independently" of what these forms represent. Similarly in relation to Serra's *Belts* (Fig. 17), also from 1966-1967, a visitor's first approach toward the work is dominated by the perception of sprawling organic forms. Perhaps only later does one gain an explicit awareness of the so-called 'belts'. Once again Serra's use of rubber - in this instance, vulcanised rubber⁹ as well as blue neon tubing - generates a highly tangible quality and allows the artist to define the work's exhibition context through the visitor's relation to it. Much as with Robert Morris's felt 'tangles' from 1967 (Figs. 10 and 11), Serra's rubber strips may be seen invading and re-establishing the boundaries of its participant's personal space, while its suspended blue neon tubing possibly alludes to industrial work such as welding, as does Morris's *Untitled (Ring with Light)* (Fig. 5) from 1965-1966. Such an effect, again, may be in keeping with Merleau-Ponty's revised definition of human perception. As he

⁸*Ibid.*, 138-9.

⁹The vulcanisation of rubber is a chemical process which renders the substance more elastic, then allowing it to harden into a desired shape. This would have permitted Serra to achieve the results seen in *Belts*.

comments: "I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time; I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them. The scope of this inclusion is the measure of that of my existence [...]"¹⁰ In constructing an intimate dialogue between the spectator's body and his *Belts* by means of their form and texture, Serra may be extending to art practice the power to affect and sculpt human perception itself.¹¹

In addition to concentrating on the perceptual experiences of many museum and gallery visitors coming in contact with his work, Serra also emphasises the literal, formal recording of his own activity in the works themselves, just as he documented these processes in his "Verb List". This transformation of action into product may be seen explicitly in the artist's *To Lift* (Fig. 18) from 1967. Using vulcanised rubber, Serra freezes as a momento of his practice yet another action which may be found in his list of verbs from 1967-1968; 'to lift' acts both as this work's title as well as its means of production. With vulcanisation rendering the rubber highly malleable during its formation, the artist simply needed 'to lift' the material toward the ceiling - while wearing a protective, heat-resistant glove - to achieve its final, solidified state. Yet *To Lift*'s soft, tent-like shape again brings a spectator into a perceptual dialogue with this proposition's unique materiality. Although the piece has noticeably hardened due to the final stage of the vulcanisation process, its surface appears velvet-like and appeals to the visitor's touch. This balance which Serra establishes between the documentation of his own activity and an interest in a participant's perceptual engagement with the work may be found again in his *Double Roll* (Fig. 19) from 1968 and other rolled-lead works such as his *Slow Roll: For Philip Glass*, also from 1968. The uneven,

¹⁰Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 140.

¹¹Serra arguably exercises this power in other, similar 'rubber pieces' made during the mid sixties. Most notable among these are his works *Chunk*, *Triangle Belt Piece* and *White Neon Belt Piece*, each from 1967, whose seductive textural qualities could invite physical contact.

crimped rings formed by the artist's rolling of lead sheets, just as one would scroll a poster or a carpet into the form of a cylinder, emphasises the fact that they were manipulated by his own hands rather than solely by machine. This formal recording of Serra's movement could relate to Merleau-Ponty's comments on the role of the human being in sculpting his or her perceivable environment:

It is never our objective body that we move, but our phenomenal body, and there is no mystery in that, as the potentiality of this or that part of the world, surges toward objects to be grasped and perceives them. In the same way [a person] has no need to look for a theatre of action and a space in which to deploy these concrete movements: the space is given to him in the form of the world as this moment [...].¹²

Alternatively said, the bodies with which both Serra and the spectator-participant engage with the world - a world fully present and without mystery - should be understood as feeling, seeing and all-perceiving bodies which can experience objects on several perceptual levels. Acting as a register of Serra's rolling process, *Double Roll* also offers an intriguing perceptual project to the visitor. These rolls' bent, elliptical edges recede into and protrude from the work like a freshly opened tin can. Generally, anyone who has experienced the sharp perforations of an opened can knows the potential danger similarly present in Serra's *Double Roll*. At close range these forms appear as if they could cut a spectator's limbs quite severely if they did not alter their physical relation to the work and its space.¹³ Likewise Serra's *Casting* (Fig. 20), a lead piece made in 1969

¹²Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 106.

¹³This aggressive, even dangerous character of some Minimalist work has been described by Anna Chave and Malcolm Miles as one its most distinguishing features. In both Chave's and Miles's arguments they refer more specifically to Serra's later, steel structures, such as his *Tilted Arc*, which will be discussed later in this thesis. For these discussions of the specific, violent tendencies of some Minimalist art, see Anna C. Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power", *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 64, No. 5 (January 1990), 44-63, and Malcolm Miles, *Art For Public Places: Critical Essays* (Winchester: Winchester School of Art Press, 1989).

expressly for the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, also demands a certain amount of concerted navigation on the participant's part.¹⁴ By allowing hot, malleable lead to cool at the meeting point between the wall and the floor, Serra creates forms which appear opaque and brittle, much like muddied ice, as well as potentially sharp if shattered by passing feet. The crumbs of lead which lie on the floor surrounding this piece could be the traces of such mishaps, may promote a viewer's awareness of their own body and its relation to the artwork. Such adjustments to the objective world which we inhabit are constant. As Merleau-Ponty suggests: "[we] witness every minute the miracle of related experiences, and yet nobody knows better than we do how this miracle is worked, for we are ourselves this network of relationships."¹⁵ Merleau-Ponty also speaks further about the role of the senses in the mapping out of objects and the larger world they inhabit:

The senses intercommunicate by opening on to the structure of [things]. One sees the hardness and brittleness of glass, and when with a tinkling sound, it breaks, this sound is conveyed by the visible glass. One sees the springiness of steel, [...] the softness of shavings. The form of objects is not their geometrical shape: it stands in relation to their specific nature, and appeals to all our other senses as well as sight.¹⁶

The formal diversity which characterises the whole of Serra's early Minimalist production can be conceived as the product of a unique, highly physical approach to creating spectator-object relationships within intimate exhibition spaces. Whether through the brittleness of *Casting*,

¹⁴Serra first experimented with this casting technique in his *Splashing*, a work initially created in a New York studio owned by the painter Jasper Johns and later reconstructed at Leo Castelli's New York Warehouse in 1968. Like the artist's *Casting*, this piece involved the throwing of hot, liquified lead onto a room's baseboards, then allowing it to cool and mold to its underlying structure. For a discussion of other Minimalist artists who adopted similar methods during the 1960s, see Miwon Kwon, "One Place After Another: Notes on Site Specificity", *October*, 80 (Spring 1997), 85-110.

¹⁵Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, xx.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 229.

through the hardness of the work *Doors*, or through the softness of his *To Lift*, Serra affects a participant's awareness of these pieces by attending to formal qualities which may be experienced by nearly all the senses - an important aspect of human perception to which the *Phenomenology* and the artist's "Verb List" also attend. However, during 1968 Serra began experimenting almost exclusively - the only exception being *Casting* from 1969 - with the propping of heavy forms against one another and against various surfaces. The heavy, almost massive, quality of these 'props' marks Serra's embrace of a larger scale in his work as well as an inclusion of tremendously labour-intensive industrial materials such as steel, lead antimony¹⁷ and concrete. Works such as his *Prop* (Fig. 21) from 1968 could be seen as examining the effects of weight, material and gravity on a spectator's perception of the work. Against one of the museum's gallery walls, Serra has oriented a large lead plate and pole in such a way as to give the effect that one form is essentially 'propping up' the other. In actuality the metal square has been fastened securely to the wall, yet the resulting piece could nonetheless produce a momentary anxiousness in the viewer - a direct consequence of this work's improbable balance of its two heavy forms. In addition to this perceptual 'trick', the evidence of Serra's personal role in manufacturing *Prop* is recorded on its surfaces in such a way as to also possibly elicit from a participant the desire to touch and physically locate its varied textures. The smeared, buffed and scratched marks covering every part of the work act as literal documents of Serra's rolling, sliding and refining of *Prop* during its production. Once again, each of these activities may be seen as extensions of Serra's early "Verb List", itself a document of his artistic methods. Yet as much as these marks and traces alert a viewer to Serra's own manipulation of materials, the

¹⁷'Lead antimony' is an alloy made by combining lead and the white, metallic element antimony, which when made part of an alloy gives it both a lustrous appearance and a brittle composition.

work ultimately stands on its own during exhibition and must relate specifically to a participant's understanding of both gallery and personal spaces. Serra's handling of marks and materials may likewise be seen in his work *Right Angle Prop* (Fig. 22) from 1969, a lead piece which similarly exposes evidence of the artist's activity as one of its primary points of engagement. Much as is in Serra's earlier *Prop*, this piece can offer viewers an anxious moment of perceived danger: its large lead plate, measuring just under 2 x 2 metres, appears to be precariously held in place by a smaller, sledge-like lead rectangle. Just as in the 1968 prop work, this hulking sheet of metal has in fact been secured to the wall, yet a participant has no way of knowing that the work is truly more stable than it first appears. Such an effect combined with the soft, lustrous sheen of the lead arguably helps to create two levels on which a participant may engage with the work: firstly he or she may be interested in Serra's specific activity and handling of the materials, and secondly he or she may relate directly to this 'prop' as a sensuous, perceptually complex, and perhaps even dangerous object.

One may similarly interpret Serra's handling and alignment of *One Ton Prop (House Of Cards)* (Fig. 23), a lead work made in 1969, as a conscious attempt to disrupt a viewer's awareness of the work's weight, structural stability and textural qualities, each effect appealing differently to our senses. Just over one metre high on each side, this work does not command the space that a proposition such as Serra's *Doors* from 1966-1967 would; it is similar to Robert Morris's *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)* (Fig. 3) or his Green Gallery works (Fig. 1) in terms of scale, because each meets the visitor near hip or thigh level and sets into motion the chance for close, physical contact. In addition to its size, *One Ton Prop's* visual appearance or 'texture' invites touch, just as his other lead works strike a balance between enhancing a viewer's awareness both of surface and

structure. Yet also during 1969, Serra can be seen beginning to move away from such works which are primarily designed to be placed within decidedly intimate gallery spaces.

His massive, hot-rolled steel work *Skullcracker Stacking Series: Stacked Steel Slabs* (Fig. 24) from the same year redefines the physical limits in which Serra is typically seen to work. This piece is significantly different from his other works in that this structure *is* actually dangerous, whereas several of Serra's propped pieces simply appear dangerous when in fact they are securely displayed. This sense of danger is wholly a function of its materials and scale; constructed at the Kaiser Steel Corporation in Fontana, California, these slabs have been stacked in such a way as to avoid collapse merely by a matter of centimetres. Serra's calculation of the effects of this weight and measurements could be seen to increase his own physical interaction with the piece as well as increase the involvement of those assisting him. The variety of perceptual and physical demands placed on the viewer by these slabs have also, as mentioned, now been consciously removed by Serra from a gallery space which would restrict the experience of his work. With this break from the traditional context of art exhibition and reception, Serra repositions perceptual engagement with his works in diverse settings other than those of the museum of gallery. Serra explores this idea further, and on a massive scale, in a number of steel and concrete works executed during 1970 and after, as will now be seen in a joint discussion of the artist's artworks and writings from this period.

II. Contextual Diversity in Serra's Work After 1970

Merleau-Ponty suggests in his *Phenomenology* that "to have a body is to possess a universal setting, a schema of all types of perceptual

unfolding and of all those inter-sensory correspondences which lie beyond the segment of the world which we are actually perceiving.”¹⁸ In Serra’s large, outdoor pieces begun in New York during 1970 we can arguably witness a similar sensitivity to the diversity of lived experience mentioned by Merleau-Ponty and which acts as the central characteristic of the phenomenological world he addresses. In looking at a work such as Serra’s *To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram, Right Angles Inverted* (Fig. 25) from 1970, we enter into a perceptual event very different from those we have seen in the artist’s other artworks. This large steel piece, embedded into a desolate city street, deep in the Bronx, New York, is awash with sensations, noises and possibly even odours one would not expect to encounter within the confines of the museum. In other words, the perceptible elements of its scene can constantly change: cars may come and go, as naturally can residents and visitors on foot. Yet, one thing does remain constant in the work - the steel ring embedded in the street itself. In fact this ring is ever-present and could be looked upon as, as much a part of this Bronx neighbourhood as the apartment blocks and business which surround it, eventhough it is consciously posed as an artistic proposition. In this way, *To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram* is at once ‘at home’ here as well as out-of-place in this context, eventhough its manhole-like shape and material are familiar in an urban setting. Thus, one could suggest that the perceptual play between foreign and familiar results in an intriguing, reflexive dialogue between a spectator’s expectations of the artwork and what he or she actually perceives.

Although installed in a very different location, Serra’s *Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevation* (Figs. 26a and 26b) - a 1970-1971 piece placed in St. Louis, Missouri - also possibly sets into motion a perceptual exercise which we can discuss in tandem with Serra’s 1970-1972 work *Shift* (Figs. 27a and

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 326.

27b), a piece installed in a large field outside King City, Ontario. We could interpret both works by relating it to a number of ideas from the *Phenomenology* and by describing the rising and falling of these works' elements over varied terrains. As Rosalind Krauss suggests in an essay which responds specifically to *Shift*: "the work marks the activity of the viewer's relationship to his world; all this flows - with breathtaking naturalness, from the *Phenomenology of Perception*."¹⁹ Krauss's rather literal phenomenological interpretation could also be applied to Serra's *Pulitzer Piece*, if we take into account the way in which its own forms can be seen to shift in appearance when visitors traverse its spaces. This Pontean interpretation may again be reinforced by a reading of Serra's essay entitled "Shift" in conjunction with the works. As the artist comments:

What I wanted was a dialectic between one's perception of the place in totality and one's relation to the field as walked. The result is a way of measuring oneself against the indeterminacy of the land.²⁰

One could arguably relate Serra's description of his practice to the suggestions put forth by Merleau-Ponty in his own text. One may also relate this phenomenological approach to art making to another of Serra's steel works, such as *Spin Out: For Bob Smithson* (Fig. 28) from 1972-73. As he did for his work *Shift*, Serra again verbally addresses the issues with which he was concerned during the making of this piece. As he describes in an interview with the critic Liza Bear: "I think the significance of the work is in its effort [...]. And that effort is a state of mind, an activity, an

¹⁹Rosalind Krauss, "Richard Serra, a Translation." Originally written for the catalogue of the Richard Serra exhibition at the Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris (October-December 1983). Reprinted in Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 267.

²⁰Reprinted in Serra, *Writings/ Interviews*, 11.

interaction with the world."²¹ Such an active, physical interaction with the context of *Spin Out* at the Rijksmuseum Kröeller-Müller in Otterlo could remind one of Merleau-Ponty's description of walking the streets of Paris or walking in the countryside. As he explains in the *Phenomenology*: "Not only have I a physical world, not only do I live in the midst of earth, air and water, I have around me roads, plantations, villages, streets, churches, implements [...]"²² *Spin Out* has also been installed in a rather pastoral setting; the trees could be seen to interact with the participant just as much as the work does, with its rolled-steel plates protruding into a visitor's path and directing his or her physical relationship with it.

This mindful placement of works within settings which can be visited by a variety of people becomes, with the installation of Serra's 1976-1980 *Wright's Triangle* (Fig. 29), perhaps the most pronounced feature of the artist's large-scale public works created in the late 1970s. This work, placed at the meeting point of two pathways at Western Washington University in Bellingham, USA, could be said to actively participate in daily, university life. For example: students hurrying between classes may have the opportunity to move and walk inside of *Wright's Triangle*; with the weather perpetually changing in this particular part of the north-western United States, it is likely that rain puddles would collect here, and change the experience of the massive steel work when it is explored on foot. The placement of this work next to the footpaths could feasibly relate to a point made by Merleau-Ponty near the end of the *Phenomenology*: "Man is but a network of relationships, and these alone matter to him."²³ Serra's proposition *Terminal* (Fig. 30) of 1977, could also act as a nexus

²¹"Document: *Spin Out '72-'73*", an interview with Liza Bear. Originally published in *Avalanche*, Summer/Fall 1973. Reprinted in Serra, *ibid.*, 15.

²²Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 347.

²³*Ibid.*, 456.

point for such networks. This large steel tower acts as a marker between the rail lines near the Hauptbahnhof, or train station, in the German town of Bochum. Not only could one call this work a perceptual sign post for those who walk by it, but the tower could also appear much different - perhaps completely different - to a person passing by it while on board a train or tram. Thus, *Terminal* establishes a decidedly malleable, perceptual relationship between itself and its spectators, who in this case could be anyone travelling in its shadow.

A similar, large-scale propped tower, entitled *T.W.U.* (Figs. 30a and 30b), was this time installed in downtown New York, near Soho, during 1980-1982. Seen from various angles, depending upon which way one travels along the surrounding streets, this steel leviathan commands not only the vision of all who pass by, but also insists upon the conscious orientation of a pedestrian's movement. Although this is achieved here by requiring pedestrians to navigate around the work, Serra also achieves this type of engagement with his *St. John's Rotary Arc* (Figs. 31a and 31b), installed at the Holland Tunnel Rotary, or 'roundabout', in New York between 1980 and 1988. Pedestrians, too, may traverse this site, but the most striking accounts of this work come from those who experience it by travelling around the *Arc* by car. As Serra comments in his 1980 essay entitled "St. John's Rotary Arc":

I have always thought of the Rotary as being a turntable, a cartwheel, a bottleneck extension, a continuation and completion of the New Jersey Turnpike, a highway roundabout at the exit of the Holland Tunnel [...] a place where cars continually turn and cross lanes in apprehension of changing directions as they enter New York [...], a place polluted by exhaust fumes, a scene of incessant change [...].²⁴

²⁴"St. John's Rotary Arc", first published in *Artforum*, September 1980. Reprinted in Serra, *Ibid.*, 119.

This incessant change, or what Merleau-Ponty could presumably term 'flux', helps to define the site as much as the immense steel arc itself, planted directly in the middle of the rotary, assists in defining it. Yet, perhaps Serra's most famous steel work, his *Tilted Arc* (Figs. 33a and 33b) of 1981, was eventually destroyed precisely because of such a public presence. After a long and heated series of court hearings, the Government Services Administration (the organisation who, in fact, first commissioned the work) had the arc, measuring more than 36 meters in length, destroyed on March 15, 1989.²⁵ Many complaints were made about how the work, installed in the Federal Plaza, New York, interfered and perhaps even hindered activities normally taking place in the space it occupied. Other complaints were made about how it was an 'eye sore' for those working in the surrounding area, and about how it did nothing to assert that it was an actual art object rather than an unfinished industrial project. From ground and street levels, however, the problems with *Tilted Arc's* placement were not always clear. Serra himself, speaking in defence of the work at the public hearings which decided its fate, mentioned that G.S.A.'s proposal to simply relocate the work would not be appropriate, for *Tilted Arc* was designed expressly for the space it occupied. Thus, moving it to an alternate site of exhibition would essentially take away one of the elements originally intended to define the *Arc*. Similar though less severe complaints have been made regarding Serra's 1981 piece *Gedenkstätte Goslar* (Fig. 32), sited directly in front of an old gate in the city of Goslar, Germany. Serra's installation of the steel work in this position does not render the passageway unusable, but it does require pedestrian traffic to make some minor adjustments to the gate itself. Once again, as seen in

²⁵For full discussions of the events leading up to and following the destruction of *Tilted Arc*, see Douglas Crimp, "Serra's Public Sculpture: Redefining Site Specificity", in Ernst-Gerhard Güse, *Richard Serra*, ex. cat. (New York: Rizzoli, 1987); Clara Weyergraf-Serra and Martha Buskirk, *Richard Serra's Tilted Arc* (n.p.: Van Abbemuseum, 1998); idem., *The Destruction of Tilted Arc Documents* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991).

several of his artworks from this time, the artist's concern for manipulating urban space to positive and intriguing ends finds expression in often unassuming, simple structures such as seen in his *Gedenkstätte Goslar*.

As has already been made clear, however, we need not look simply to Richard Serra's later works to find his engagement with the problems and possibilities of perception on an artistic level. From his earliest artworks of the 1960s to his somewhat infamous *Tilted Arc* of 1981, Serra's sculptural project has arguably been engaged with issues of perception, and has produced unique spectator experiences and diverse contexts in which these perceptual dramas could unfold. This engagement may be particularly evident in his shift from working exclusively in interior or private exhibition spaces to exploring urban, rural and other public contexts. Yet, whether or not Serra can be said to directly address and reflect a first-hand knowledge of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's notion of perception is still unclear. Indeed, the artist's work can be singularly difficult to interpret, and attempting to locate evidence of one or any number of specific sources for his production in the works themselves is often frustrating. Bearing this in mind, we may now like to look more closely at the written evidence for the complex and varied ideas which drive Serra's production.

Chapter 5

Sources, Texts and Interpretation: Using Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* in the Criticism of Minimalist Sculpture

The interpretation and analysis of Minimalist sculpture has, since its emergence, always been a complex and, at times, strenuous project. It has perhaps been made more difficult by the association of certain texts - most especially, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* - with the artworks or so-called 'primary structures' of artists such as Robert Morris and Richard Serra. This difficulty could be said to arise from the hegemonic insistence that Minimalism can find its definite, almost singular origins in this text. In fact, the critic Rosalind Krauss has specifically spoken of Minimalist art itself as a form of phenomenology in its own right.¹ Yet to speak about Minimalism *as* a phenomenology is very different from speaking about it in phenomenological terms. The present discussion of the artworks of Morris and Serra has, thus far, endeavoured to speak phenomenologically *about* these artists' practices and not to treat them as independent forms of ontological philosophy. It has also related a number of Merleau-Ponty's comments on human experience and perception to their works, for his theory has been proposed by several critics to be *the* source for these and other Minimalist artists' ideas concerning the relation between their objects and perception.

One would assume, then, that substantial evidence for this partnership between Merleau-Ponty's theory and Morris's and Serra's work would be available in their sculpture and perhaps in their writings. However, as we have witnessed thus far, such evidence is anything but

¹ This point is accentuated by Hal Foster in *The Return of the Real*, 42. Krauss's *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, the text on which this comment is based, will be discussed more thoroughly later in this conclusion.

obvious or substantial. In order to explore just why such evidence is lacking and to assess its ramifications, we can again look at selected artworks and writings by Morris and Serra, and talk about exactly how they do, and in some cases do not, reflect an explicit understanding of the philosophical principles presented in the *Phenomenology*. In light of questioning the links between phenomenological theory and Minimalist practice, we should additionally question the use of this philosophy in explaining or justifying various art practices. In accounting for this methodological crisis, it may be helpful to use as a point of departure the critic Susan Sontag's essay from 1964 entitled "Against Interpretation" which calls attention to notable problems in the interpretation and theoreticisation of artworks.² This text seems particularly relevant to a discussion of Minimalism in the 1960s and 1970s, because during this time we witness a radical formal and ideological shift in the production of art, one around which there was a tremendous, as Sontag calls it, 'burgeoning' of critical commentary as well as a glut of interpretation. It is in these closing comments, then, that we can hope to gauge the limits of ascribing to Robert Morris's and Richard Serra's artworks a distinctly Pontean heritage. Furthermore, we can begin to re-think the kind of theoretical trend which often places the interpretation of artworks in a position of critical authority whilst deeming the first-hand, personal experience of any work as unintellectual and thus, of little consequence to the artwork's 'deeper', historical meaning.

²Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation", *Evergreen Review*, 1964. Reprinted in Fernie, ed., *Art History and Its Methods* (London: Phaidon, 1996); 216-222.

I. Looking Beyond the *Phenomenology* in the Writings of Morris and Serra

In assessing the extent of the relation between Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and Minimalist practice, we may look to Robert Morris's and Richard Serra's writings for a special kind of evidence which could help us to reach a conclusion. One may call this evidence 'special' primarily because these texts could act, in part, as written testimony of the ideas and motivations which are alongside the artists' works at given moments. However, this is not to say that these essays and commentaries could be in any way proof of either Morris's or Serra's mindset. Rather, we can use their comments as guides to produce a rough sketch of their many possible artistic moods and influences. In using these writings in such a way, we may begin to question the purely phenomenological accounts of their production supported thus far. Instead of obvious connections to Pontean theory, we see other, significant levels of engagement in their work. This can be seen explicitly in the extensive writings of Robert Morris.

Although its decidedly phenomenological overtones have already been discussed, Morris's essay "Notes on Sculpture, Part I"³ from February 1966 can also be analysed in terms of its attempt to revise traditional, art historical appraisals of sculpture. Morris alludes to this aim almost directly from the outset, for as he claims: "There has been little definitive writing on present-day sculpture. When it is discussed, it is often called in to support a broad iconographic or iconological point of view - after the supporting examples of painting have been exhausted."⁴ Morris, in fact, speaks very 'art-historically' himself here, and seems adamant about revising the unbalanced, critical accounts of the relationship between

³ Reprinted in Morris, 1-9.

⁴ Ibid., 1.

sculpture and painting. He achieves this, as will be seen, by using other artists and historians to describe the views of both misguided art makers and critics, as well as the more artistically 'forward thinking' - a select group with which he greatly sympathises. In addition to this, Morris's comments appear to inform us less about his particular approach to art-making itself than do about his artworks' place within the sculptural tradition. Importantly, this essay also attempts to state precisely what sculpture actually *is* and *is not*, particularly *vis à vis* painting. To demonstrate this, Morris asserts: "In the interest of differences, it seems time that some of the distinctions sculpture has managed for itself be articulated. To begin in the broadest possible way, it should be stated that the concerns of sculpture have been for some time not only distinct but hostile to those of painting. The clearer the nature of the values of sculpture become, the stronger the opposition appears."⁵

In this short, theoretical essay, the reader is faced with a potent manifesto for Morris's projects - projects which intend to carry on the traditions of the Constructivists and other early twentieth-century artists concerned with the plight of modern sculpture against illusionism and other characteristics foreign to the medium. We can see the artist speak directly about the difficult relationship between painting and sculpture this century:

The primary problematic concerns with which advanced painting has been occupied for about half a century have been structural. [...] Sculpture, on the other hand, never having been involved in illusionism, could not possibly have based the efforts of fifty years upon the rather pious, if somewhat contradictory, act of giving up this illusionism and approaching the object [...] the sculptural facts of space, light, and materials have always functioned concretely and literally.⁶

⁵ Ibid., 1-3.

⁶ Ibid., 3.

In support of the experiments of Alexander Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin, and Naum Gabo - to name a few, early artists concerned with championing the unique characteristics of sculpture - Morris also calls attention to "a reassertion of the non-imagistic as an essential condition"⁷ in the work of the New and Minimalist practitioners. Certainly, we have seen this trend in Morris's production itself, ranging from his earliest pieces to his later, 'process'-based works. Yet, in addition to criticising the use of illusionism in sculpture, which dilutes and distracts attention away from its reliance on light, space, and materials, Morris launches attacks on the prevalence of added relief and colour in the sculpture of notable earlier and even contemporary artists. However, such elements have only recently been seen as foreign, he claims: "The relief has always been accepted as a viable mode. However, it cannot be accepted today as legitimate. The autonomous and literal nature of sculpture demands that it have its own, equally literal space - not a surface shared with painting."⁸ Additionally, Morris finds the application of colour to sculpture (when colour is essentially native to painting and therefore opposed in every, 'perceivable' way to three-dimensional media) to be artistically misguided. He states: "Color, as it has been established in painting, notably by [Jules] Olitski and [Morris] Louis, is a quality not at all bound to stable forms. Michael Fried has pointed out that one of their major efforts has been, in fact, to free color of drawn shape."⁹ However, Morris returns:

It is this essentially optical, immaterial, noncontainable, nontactile nature of color that is inconsistent with the physical nature of sculpture. the qualities of scale, proportion, shape, mass are physical. Each of these qualities is made visible by the adjustment of an obdurate, literal mass. Color, does not have this charactersitic. It is additive.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

We can see then that Morris raises the objection to colour because it, as he says, emphasises the optical features in a sculptural work and in doing so, subverts its primary, physical nature. This is why, when applying colour to his own constructions, the artist opts for more 'neutral' hues which rarely "call attention to themselves".¹¹

From Morris's comments we can gather evidence of his critical crusade with which he intends to enliven the debate over contemporary sculpture. Yet, this evidence does not directly account for the connections generally made between his own, personal 'philosophy' and the phenomenological concepts of Merleau-Ponty. Many ideas which act as the instruments of his revision seem related to phenomenology, but not necessarily that which is particularly espoused in the *Phenomenology of Perception*. Morris's attitude toward the use of colour in three-dimensional constructions, for example, differs greatly from Merleau-Ponty's appreciation of colour as an perceptually enriching element. Let us return to the *Phenomenology* for a moment and explore this as well as other differences. Merleau-Ponty's describes the experience of colour quite clearly and at length:

to see is to have colours or lights, to hear is to have sounds, to sense (*sentir*) is to have qualities. To know what sense-experience is, then, is it not enough to have seen a red or to have heard an A? But red and green are not sensations, they are the sensed (*sensibles*), and quality is not an element of consciousness, but a property of the object. Instead of providing a simple means of delimiting sensations, if we consider it in the experience itself which evinces it, the quality is as rich and mysterious as the object, or indeed the whole spectacle, perceived. This red patch which I see on the carpet is red only in virtue of a shadow which lies across it, its quality is apparent only in relation to the play of light upon it, and hence as an element in a spatial configuration.

¹¹ Ibid., 5.

Moreover the colour can be said to be there only if it occupies an area of a certain size, too small an area not being describable in these terms.¹²

According to this definition, colour is not a mere additive sensation laid on top of 'things' as Morris would contend, but is rather an integral and complex element of perceptual experience. Additionally, Merleau-Ponty claims that colour is directly dependent on the effects of space and light, factors which Morris argues are best exemplified by structures or things uncomplicated by colour. Thus, if the artist did read the *Phenomenology*, one could reasonably argue that he did not wholly understand it. However, Morris's first task as demonstrated in this essay is to liberate the study and production of sculpture from terms and elements traditionally associated with painting. Although he repeatedly shows an interest in issues relating to perception, the artist's primary objective need not necessarily be to proselytise or promote the phenomenological virtues of Merleau-Ponty's text. In the end, though, we are left to question whether or not a discussion of Morris's artworks, using distinctly Pontean terminology and concepts, is justified. For as we can see in other writings by the artist, Morris's mention of perception and its complexities may not reflect first-hand knowledge of phenomenological theory.

The artist's essay from October 1966, entitled "Notes on Sculpture, Part II",¹³ provides us with further evidence for Morris's complex concerns. His revisionist-styled manifesto is largely continued here, although the artist again discusses issues of perception as they relate to sculpture. Continuing his somewhat historical analysis of the traditional role of sculpture in the visual arts, he suggests:

The size range of useless three-dimensional things is a continuum between the monument and the ornament.

¹² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 4-5.

¹³ Reprinted in Morris, 11-21.

Sculpture has generally been thought of as those objects not at the polarities but falling between. The new work being done today falls between the extremes of this size continuum. [...] A particular term for the new work is not as important as knowing what its values and standards are.¹⁴

So then, one may ask, what are these 'values and standards' as Morris conceives of them? The artist stresses here that the goals of the New sculpture are often to isolate the elements most basic to the three-dimensional medium itself, whilst expelling and gaining distance from all characteristics traditionally associated with sculpture (such as relief, colour and so on), which are actually borrowed from painting. However, one could also argue that Morris sees sculpture's relation to the spectator and his or her perception of art as yet another area of interest for the New artists. Arguably, this is because, as Morris tells us: "In the perception of relative size [eg. of any object], the human body enters into the total continuum of sizes and establishes itself as a constant on that scale."¹⁵ Yet despite this explicit interest in the human form as the rule against which sculpture is 'measured', the Minimalists or New artists, according to Morris, are still focused on exploring the most primary elements of three-dimensional structures which separate sculpture from painting. As he contends:

The particular shaping, proportions, size, and surface of the specific object in question are still critical sources for the particular quality the work generates. But it is now not possible to separate these decisions, which are relevant to the object as a thing in itself, from those decisions external to its physical presence. For example, in much of the new work in which the forms have been held to be unitary, placement becomes critical as it never was before in establishing the particular quality of the work.¹⁶

Although it is closely related to the perception and interaction of the

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., 20.

individual spectator with an artwork, Morris mentions this newly appraised quality to emphasise the fact that sculpture maintains an unique set of characteristics which necessitate a discussion separate from those about painting.

His essay "Anti Form",¹⁷ from 1968, also describes Morris's belief in the new artistic potential found in creating so-called 'anti-form' artworks, as several of his pieces from the late 1960s attest. In this text, Morris comments on his reasons for moving from his rigidly geometric, modular style (seen in such works as those shown at the Green Gallery), to a more 'process'-based, relaxed approach to producing objects. However, he insists that his former geometric style did serve a number of purposes:

The use of the rectangular has a long history. The right angle has been in use since the first post and lintel constructions. [...] But only in the case of object-type art have the forms of the cubic and the rectangular been brought so far forward into the final definition of the work. That is, it stands as a self-sufficient whole shape rather than as a relational element. To achieve a cubic or rectangular form is to build in the simplest, most reasonable way, but it is also to build well.

This imperative for the well-built thing solved certain problems. It got rid of asymmetrical placing and composition, for one thing. The solution also threw out all nonrigid materials. This is not the whole story of so-called Minimal or Object art.¹⁸

We are led to believe that in light of Morris's own use of such 'nonrigid' and rough media, as in his 1969 installation *Continuous Project Altered Daily* (Fig. 15) for example, he and other contemporary artists are attempting to expand on this very story. Yet, to take this point further, what is the 'moral' in the story of Minimalist art? From the evidence gathered thus far, one might say that its lesson, as Morris sees it, concerns the dangers of relegating sculpture to a merely analogous status alongside

¹⁷ Reprinted in Morris, 41-49

¹⁸ Ibid., 41.

painting. How is sculpture particularly in peril, we may ask? Again according to Morris's comments on the differences between these media, the use of elements such as relief, colour or relational composition in sculpture dilutes those characteristics which are truly unique to it, namely its relation to light, space, scale and the passing of time. The result is a form of practice which can do nothing but evoke, represent and reproduce states of affairs just as in painting. This, then, compromises and distracts a spectator's experience of any such sculpture away from those qualities most fundamental to it.

Morris's artworks, from his Green Gallery pieces to his sprawling anti-form compositions, can be seen to isolate these fundamental characteristics in a move to revise sculpture's relation to painting as well as to assert its independence. As we have read in his texts, these issues are also closely related to human perception and its complexities. Yet, are we provided with significant clues to the source (or sources) for the artist's ideas and vocabulary regarding perception? It has been suggested, both here and in a number of critical texts, that Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* acts as a primary font of ideas for Morris despite any explicit evidence of such. Morris constructs his essays in a very academic fashion, fully referencing his comments and ideas in detailed footnotes. Therefore, if some mention - whether brief or otherwise - is not made of this specific phenomenological tradition, we might like to question the usual association between his artistic production and Pontean theory.

The same could be said for the works and essays of Richard Serra, whose production has also been critically linked to the *Phenomenology of*

Perception. It has been suggested in the present discussion that Serra's work deals with and manipulates to intriguing, artistic ends several ideas put forth by Merleau-Ponty. However we are compelled to ask yet again, what evidence is there which would support this interpretation? We may return to a number of Serra's writings from the 1960s to the early 1980s, and put to them several of the same questions asked of Morris's texts. Namely, does the *Phenomenology* figure explicitly in his comments? Also, what are the lessons or morals of the Minimalist story as Serra 'tells' it through his production? To address these issues, we may begin by looking once again at the artist's text entitled "Verb List, 1967-68".¹⁹ Originally, this list of the artist's actions and movements was read as an attempt to describe Serra's body-centred or perception-centred approach to art production. However, one could also read it as a simple record of the countless forms of artistic (and particular sculptural) activity. In it, such possibilities appear endless:

| | |
|------------|---------------------------------|
| to roll | to curve |
| to crease | to lift |
| to fold | to inlay |
| to store | to impress |
| to bend | to fire |
| to shorten | to flood |
| to twist | to smear |
| to dapple | to rotate |
| to crumple | to swirl [. . .]. ²⁰ |

More than it demonstrates any particular influences on his work, the list confirms Serra's involvement with a number of different techniques. The suggestion that this text indicates an acquaintance with the concepts of phenomenological philosophy is almost superfluous, if we consider the points previously made by Robert Morris regarding the inseparability of

¹⁹ Reprinted in Serra, 3-4.

²⁰ Ibid., 3.

sculpture from issues of the body and perception. Certainly, a fascination with the human body and perception are illustrated here, but it would be hazardous to argue that Serra's list evinces a distinctly Pontean understanding of such. In the artist's early production of rubber and rolled-steel pieces, such as his *Belts* (Fig. 17) from 1966-67 and *Double Roll* (Fig. 19) from 1968, we witness the same exploration of the means and processes of three-dimensional construction as he does in "Verb List", and not a translation of phenomenological themes.

Serra voices a similar interest in the diverse possibilities of sculptural composition in his short essay "Shift"²¹ from 1973. As previously mentioned, it serves to document the artist's attitude toward the making and the effects of his large, outdoor work from 1970-72 of the same name (Figs. 27a and 27b). Serra describes it in great detail:

We located Dufferin Road, which is the eastern-most approach to the site from a topological survey map (Lot 2, Concession 3, Township of King, Regionality Municipality of York, scale of one inch to 400 feet). Surrounded on three sides by trees and swamp, the site is a farming field consisting of two hills separated by a dog-leg valley. In the summer of 1970, Joan (Jonas) and I spent five days walking the place. We discovered that two people walking the distance of the field opposite one another, attempting to keep each other in view despite the curvature of the land, would mutually determine a topological definition of the space. [...] The horizon of the work was established by the possibility of maintaining this mutual viewpoint.²²

This essay seems concerned less with demonstrating Serra's knowledge of certain concepts as it is with describing a total approach to *Shift's* site and creation. Following the observation of the critic Yve-Alain Bois, one may see a number of the artist's writings as "the verbal equivalent of a

²¹ Reprinted in Serra, 11-13

²² Ibid., 11.

storyboard".²³ In making films for either cinema or television, the storyboard acts as a series of panels on which a sequence of sketches depicts the film's different scenes and action. Like this sequence, Serra's essay "Shift" maps out both the landscape according to whose distinct terrain the sculpture will be situated and the course of the artist's movement over the site. The artist speaks directly about this all-important presence of a mobile viewer for his composition:

The work establishes a measure: one's relation to it and to the land. One walks down the hill into the piece. [...] As one follows the work farther into the field, one is forced to shift and turn with the work and look back across the elevational drop. Insofar as the stepped elevations function as horizons cutting into and extending towards the real horizon, they suggest themselves as orthogonals within the terms of a perspective system of measurement. The machinery of renaissance space depends on measurements remaining fixed and immutable. These steps relate to a continually shifting horizon, and as measurements, they are totally transitive [...]. The line as a visual element, per step, becomes a transitive verb.²⁴

Indeed the shifting nature of the piece, well-planned out by Serra, relies on a human element - the moving, walking, visually surveying element of the spectator. Thus, not only does the work establish a measure - that of the viewer to the total site and elements of *Shift* - but likewise, Serra's text also helps to establish a measure of this particular writing to the artist's total project. For, the artist's almost constant motion during the creation of this piece can be seen in direct proportion to the perpetual movement from artistic challenge to challenge and perpetual experimentation demonstrated by his diverse body of works.

It is difficult, naturally, to summarise Serra's ever-shifting and

²³ Yve-Alain Bois, "Review of Richard Serra at the DIA Center for the Arts", *Artforum* XXXVI, No. 5 (January 1997), 96.

²⁴ Serra, "Shift". Reprinted in Serra, 12-13.

varied approach to making sculpture. However, this difficulty in conclusively characterising his production could prove the most accurate way in which to describe it. Instead of ascribing to Serra's works phenomenological roots as is critically customary, we can try to account for their shifting nature by looking back at how the artist has spoken in different ways about his project thus far. As we witnessed in Serra's "Verb List", a body-centred approach to art-making need not be explicitly founded on a phenomenological tradition like that of Merleau-Ponty, as has been suggested. We can understand this idea more clearly by looking again at the artist's work from 1980, *St. John's Rotary Arc* (Figs. 31a and 31b) and particularly, by drawing on a number of his comments about this piece. In the preceding chapter, Serra's related essay entitled "St. John's Rotary Arc" was assessed in terms of how it may demonstrate the artist's interest in phenomenological philosophy. Yet, it could also be interpreted as evidence of Serra's interest in a host of other artistic considerations which should now be clarified.

Far from speaking in an explicit, phenomenological manner, Serra discusses his *Rotary Arc* in a decidedly broad and descriptive way: "The 200-foot *Arc* is a quadrant of an 800-foot circle, its center being located at the asphalt edge of the Rotary (Varick Street side) where the oval begins to contract. [...] The *Arc* does not represent the context, but redefines it. It mediates a perception of the site but ultimately refocuses attention on itself."²⁵ One may recognise this casual style of description: Serra also uses it when commenting on his large work *Shift*, in his essay of the same name. Here, just as is seen in his *Rotary Arc* comments, the artist emphasises the quality of his work as walked or as experienced whilst in motion. In both cases, Serra provides complete topographic descriptions of

²⁵ Serra, "St. John's Rotary Arc". Reprinted in Serra, 120.

the scenes or contexts in which his works are situated. He also supplies us with summaries of either the artist's or a spectator's movement around them. As highlighted previously, many views of the *Rotary Arc* are possible:

Following the roundabout, the driver sees the *Arc* to the left and obliquely, in front. From almost every position in the oval, the *Arc* rotates centrifugally outward. This centrifugal reading opposes the driver's centripetal movement. [...] For a pedestrian a viewing sequence is not predetermined. Where one starts is irrelevant. A curve, having no beginning, no end, no back, no front, no right, no left, denies a starting point, and any hierarchy of views and viewing positions. The pedestrian acknowledges the entire contextual field and sees the *Arc* within this diversity. [...] In its length and height, it establishes a measure.²⁶

Thus, we could term Serra's text "*St. John's Rotary Arc*" a virtual storyboard, as we have his essay "*Shift*". Yet perhaps more importantly, there is a similarity between these two texts which points to a significant trend in the way the artist conceives of and speaks about his projects. As in the earlier essay, Serra describes the artwork as a piece which 'establishes a measure' between the work and the spectator who encounters it. This essay itself, as does "*Shift*", also establishes another measure, one between the text, the artwork and Serra's larger artistic vision. In it, the artist proclaims the primacy of a mobile, perceiving participant to the success, and perhaps even completion, of the *Arc* as well as his other urban sculptures. As Serra has asserted, his works 'mediate a perception' of their contexts and through these diverse, ever-changing settings, the artist's sculptures frustrate any 'hierarchy of views and viewing positions'.

Human perception, according to this description, is an integral element and critical target of Serra's works. However, can we claim that his conception of what it means to be a perceiving subject is derived from

²⁶ Ibid., 121-122.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy? Although the evidence discussed thus far makes us uncertain of a conclusive answer, we can come to a number of conclusions regarding what Serra's artworks and writings *do* demonstrate. As we have seen throughout his production, the artist's choice of materials and his approach to their manipulation have consistently emphasised the importance of diversity, physicality and perceptual experience to his project. Just as Robert Morris's numerous writings evince a preoccupation with human perception for the sake of sculpture's revision, Serra also draws attention to his artistic aims by using a vocabulary which, like Morris's, places emphasis the body's relation to his artworks. However, in the context of Serra's practice this interest in perception does not serve to rescue the criticism of sculpture from the traditional prejudices which Morris confronts, but rather it serves to elucidate the manifold, artistic possibilities Serra appears to find in almost all media and in almost any exhibition context. Thus, it can be said that the issue of human perception is treated by these Minimalist artists in two, very distinct ways: it can be seen to provide the base for Robert Morris's revision of art practice, as well as for Richard Serra's diversification of a spectator's art experience. Yet, as mentioned in the extended discussion of Morris's essays, the perceived effects of space, light and time are already considerations inherent in the practice and experience of sculpture. These elements which, in fact, define sculpture as opposed to painting, have simply been brought into greater relief by these artist's in an effort to redefine and revive its practice.

In light of the diversity of these artists' efforts, it would be highly suspicious to believe, as was initially proposed, that Morris, Serra and

other Minimalists have looked to a common source for their ideas. Indeed, it would be even more difficult to argue that their motivations sprang from a single, specific text such as Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology*, as numerous critics have claimed. In order to understand precisely how these explanations of the New sculpture are structured and the problematic handling of phenomenological philosophy in such interpretations, we may finally inspect a number of critical writings in detail.

II. Questioning Interpretation: Minimalism's Critical Reception and Its Difficulties

In her book entitled *On Abstract Art*, the critic Briony Fer suggests that "phenomenology is the philosophy of Minimalism".²⁷ Yet, one might benefit from questioning the reasoning behind such a claim. This interpretation of the New art and several others like it, can be said to have one characteristic in common: in addition to assuming that a distinctly Pontean understanding of perception lies at the heart of many Minimalist artworks, most analyses of these pieces also revolve around their often startling, new formal character which breaks with traditional sculptural practice. Such a trait is not insignificant, even though many would say that a large portion of art historical criticism already takes up the issue of form implicitly. However, what makes this critical approach significant to our understanding of Minimalist production is the way in which such interpretations find the so-called meaning of these artworks in their explicit handling of form, rather than in their representational or illusionistic content. Yet, the critical search for meaning in these particular

²⁷Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art*, 135.

artworks is highly problematic, especially if we consider that pieces like those of Robert Morris and Richard Serra develop their meaning or significance in conjunction with their spectators and exhibition contexts. Perhaps most troubling of all are those interpretations which tether artistic meaning to certain texts and concepts. One could argue that this practice results in devaluing the direct of experience of Minimalist artworks themselves. This argument is specifically put forth by the critic and artist Susan Sontag in her essay "Against Interpretation" of 1964. Later, we will be looking at her comments more closely once the many ways in which historians analyse Minimalist practice have themselves been discussed in some detail.

Firstly, just as Briony Fer was earlier shown to suggest, the critic Kenneth Baker also argues that Minimalist production is dominated by a phenomenological sensibility. In his text *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance*, Baker explains that artists like Morris and Serra "found opportunities in the conventions of exhibiting art to investigate the perceptual and situational factors in seeing."²⁸ Yet, the author makes a more explicit reference to the supposed phenomenological heritage of these and other artists' work. He states:

Critics have understood these works [...] in terms of the widespread interest in phenomenological philosophy among artists in the 1960s. Phenomenology, and particularly the thought of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, was the subject of much discussion in the art world during the Minimalist years.²⁹

However, Baker's unsatisfyingly vague and over-simplistic analyses of Minimalist artworks do not justify such a statement. His brief mention of "Merleau-Ponty's understanding that 'subjectivity is inherence in the

²⁸ Baker, *Minimalism: Art of Circumstance*, 67.

²⁹ Ibid., 83.

world''³⁰ and its connection with Minimalist ideas hardly constitutes a thorough investigation of the relation of such theory to the New art. Thus, we may like to question this explicitly philosophical reading of Minimalist art practice. For instance, we may ask why Merleau-Ponty's texts gained the recognition of artists and critics in the 1960s and after.

The historian and critic Hal Foster directly addresses this question in his recent text, *The Return of the Real*. Although Foster, too, assumes an explicitly phenomenological (if not Pontean) interpretation of the works of Morris, Serra and other Minimalists, he is careful in accounting for precisely how phenomenological theory may have been picked up by both artists and critics alike. As Foster asserts:

It is true that, as represented by Edmund Husserl and Ferdinand de Saussure, phenomenology and structural linguistics did emerge with high modernism. Yet neither discourse was current among artists until the 1960s, that is, until the time of minimalism [...]. Now if this is so, [...] minimalism is phenomenological at base [...].³¹

The author goes on to say, as was suggested tentatively much earlier in the present discussion, that the "reception of phenomenology was mediated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, especially his *Phenomenology of Perception*, which was translated in 1962."³² Foster mentions the *Phenomenology's* first translation into English to emphasise the probability of the Minimalist artists being engaged with the text itself. However, such a connection is not evidence in its own right. As has recently been shown in our revised analyses of the writings of Morris and Serra, concrete evidence of Minimalism's direct involvement with Merleau-Ponty's work or other phenomenological texts is virtually nonexistent. Still, the links between his philosophy and the New sculpture are emphasised again and again,

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 43.

³² Ibid., 243n.

particularly in response to the ways in which artworks like those of Morris and Serra, manipulate and highlight the importance of a spectator's perception. Yet as demonstrated, the making and experience of sculpture or other non-traditional, three-dimensional works already deals explicitly with issues that phenomenology specifically addresses in relation to human perception. One may therefore argue, as before, that the injection of the themes of perception, light, space and time into a discussion of any sculptural practice is resoundingly superfluous. However, what critics believe to be significantly different about Minimalist sculpture is the 'fact' that this work handles several issues of perception in an explicit and concentrated manner.

Few critics or historians argue such a case as strongly or convincingly as the author Rosalind Krauss, whose comments on Serra's *Shift* we have already looked at. Like Foster, Krauss also alerts us the arrival of phenomenological theory on the 1960s art 'scene' in America, and in doing so, inadvertantly assists us in seriously questioning both her as well as others' use of this philosophy in the interpretation of Minimalist art. Let us begin by looking at some of Krauss's earliest comments on Minimalism and their relation to another notable, critical attitude. In her book of 1977, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, the author speaks about the nature of the 'new sculpture' of the 1960s and 70s.³³ As she describes it, this sculptural practice "is predicated on the feeling that what sculpture *was* is insufficient because founded on an idealist myth."³⁴ The minimalists' general dissatisfaction with this 'idealist' work of their predecessors - and even some contemporaries - was described plainly by the artist Donald Judd in 1964. Speaking about the problems associated with the European artistic tradition (problems such as what Frank Stella

³³ See Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 242.

termed 'relational composition'), Judd commented:

The qualities of European art so far, ... they're linked up with a philosophy - rationalism, rationalist philosophy. [...] All that art is based on systems built beforehand, *a priori* systems; they express a certain type of thinking and logic that is pretty much discredited now as a way of finding out what the world's like.³⁵

Krauss describes in her text the particular relevance of the two distinct, critical traditions mentioned by Hal Foster and which allegedly resuscitated the study and practice of sculpture during the 1960s:

the history of modern sculpture coincides with the development of two bodies of thought, phenomenology and structural linguistics, in which meaning is understood to depend on the way that any form contains the latent experience of its opposite: simultaneity always containing an implicit experience of sequence. One of the striking aspects of modern sculpture is the way in which it manifests its makers' growing awareness that sculpture is a medium peculiarly located at the juncture between stillness and motion, time arrested and time passing. From this tension, which defines the very condition of sculpture, comes its enormous expressive power.³⁶

Essentially, Krauss suggests that the 'tension' between various experiences of time, space and motion 'which defines the very condition of sculpture' is somehow made more manifest and immediate by appraising artworks with the help of phenomenological or structuralist theory. Yet, how can something which is absolutely integral to the very existence of sculpture be seen as *more* integral to its being merely by focusing on it? Importantly, too, how can phenomenological theory in the hands of Minimalist artists be used to make these integral characteristics more obvious? As already discovered, it is unclear whether or not practitioners such as Morris and

³⁵ Donald Judd was joined by artist Frank Stella in an interview conducted by Bruce Glaser for radio broadcast on WBAI-FM, New York in February 1964, which was entitled "New Nihilism or New Art?". This was later edited by Lucy Lippard and published in *Art News*, September 1966. Reprinted in Battcock, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, first edition 1968, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); 151.

³⁶ Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, 4-5.

Serra in fact utilised any specific ideas from phenomenological philosophy in the construction of their artworks. At best, we can argue that they do deal with issues of perception, time and space, but then, so does all sculpture according to Morris as well as Rosalind Krauss. So how, then, are we to make sense of the argument promoted by these critics which situates at Minimalism's base not only an explicit interest in phenomenology but more specifically, an engagement with the work of Merleau-Ponty?

It may be helpful in accounting for this problem to now look to Susan Sontag's essay *Against Interpretation*, which calls attention to significant problems in the critical interpretation and theoreticisation of both artworks in general and particularly, of contemporary works. For example, the text describes various problems raised for the author by works of art in different genres, and in particular the theoretical assumptions which underly judgements made about them. Sontag argues that from Plato to our own day, there seems to have been a belief in the Western world that art needs interpreting. As Eric Fernie points out in an introductory summation of her essay: "As the Western world has become increasingly complex, so possible interpretations have burgeoned until actual experience of the work of art has almost become irrelevant"; therefore, as Fernie says, "Sontag's essay is [...] most directly relevant to the debate [...] of theory versus experience".³⁷ As Sontag claims, the explanation of content in artworks is lauded as essential to their interpretation, whereas their form is relegated to an accessory of such interpretation: "Whether we conceive of the work of art on the model of the picture [...] or on the model of a statement (as the statement of the artist), content still comes first. [...] as it is put today, [...] a work of art by definition says

³⁷ Fernie on "Against Interpretation", in Fernie, ed., *Art History and Its Methods: A Critical Anthology* (London: Phaidon Press, 1996), 214.

something."³⁸

Again, this idea appears particularly relevant to a discussion of minimalist practice of the 1960s and 70s. In place of an interest in representational content, one could argue that the interpretation of form became paramount during the time of Minimalist art, for there was a radical formal shift in the production of art. Interpretations were centred not around an analysis of minimalist works' content or what they supposedly 'said' (something which, however once traditional, was becoming of seemingly minor significance); interpretation was now focused on their innovative forms and the challenges to spectatorship which they offered. Speaking of a time when discussions of content reigned over analyses of artistic form, Sontag insists: "What the overemphasis on the idea of content entails is the perennial, never consummated project of interpretation."³⁹ Yet, could we not say that with the rise of Minimalism, this incessant critique of content had simply been traded for a preoccupation with the interpretation of form? In fact, in surveying much of the criticism aimed at minimalist practice, we could also say that the "task of interpretation", as Susan Sontag again states, became "virtually one of translation".⁴⁰ One may contend that this new, critical re-alignment with the issue of form rather than that of content had indeed been made in the 1960s, and that the intense theoretical premises (in this case, phenomenological) upon which many minimalist artworks are allegedly based created a situation where these works were seen to need some form of 'translation', as if presented to us in radical and unknown foreign languages. Yet, are they as undecipherable as many critics would have us believe?

³⁸ Sontag, "Against Interpretation". Reprinted in Fernie, 217.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

III. In Conclusion

The task of this thesis has been not only to trace the possible phenomenological influences upon the work of Robert Morris and Richard Serra, but also to analyse and question the appropriateness of critical approaches to their production - approaches which suggest that the intended 'meaning' of their works (one which is, more often than not, provided by critics) is found by means of a feat of intellection, rather than by way of a direct, uncoded and accessible experience. As Susan Sontag claims, "the effusion of interpretation of art today poisons our sensibilities."⁴¹ Instead of allowing the act of interpretation to exist primarily on the level of direct spectatorship, the work's 'meaning' stems rather from a level of specialised, critical consideration which, nonetheless, does contain a modicum of physical engagement with the work. Ultimately though, it is in this critical situation that, Sontag states, "interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone."⁴² Here, we can take this statement to mean a number of things; it may mean that such critical interpretation refuses to leave art in the hands of unmediated experience, or perhaps even to leave art 'to be what it will be'. In any case, we can question the strength of several interpretations of Minimalist practice highlighted in this discussion, and the notion that specialised critics and theory have a privileged understanding of the arguably complex and innumerable motivations lying behind an artist's work.

By calling attention to the problems in interpreting the artworks of Robert Morris and Richard Serra, one may also argue that the rise of phenomenological (and especially Pontean) readings of their work and

⁴¹ Ibid., 218.

⁴² Ibid., 219.

that of other New artists stands in direct relation to the emergence of 'new' or revisionist philosophies in critical circles on the whole. Although the richly evocative concepts which Merleau-Ponty endorses in his *Phenomenology of Perception* are useful in appraising a variety of phenomena, whether it be art or human experience, it has been shown that Morris and Serra respond to a number of both artistic and personal issues in the creation of their diverse sculptural works throughout the 1960s and beyond. So, in saying that their artworks as well as those of other Minimalists attempt to return to 'the soil of the sensible' or to relate to the level of basic human knowledge, we mean that these artists' works address a plethora of issues relating to art, perception and experience, and not simply those issues which, when broadcast by critics, establish the need for critics themselves and establish an indispensable role for the on-going interpretation of art.

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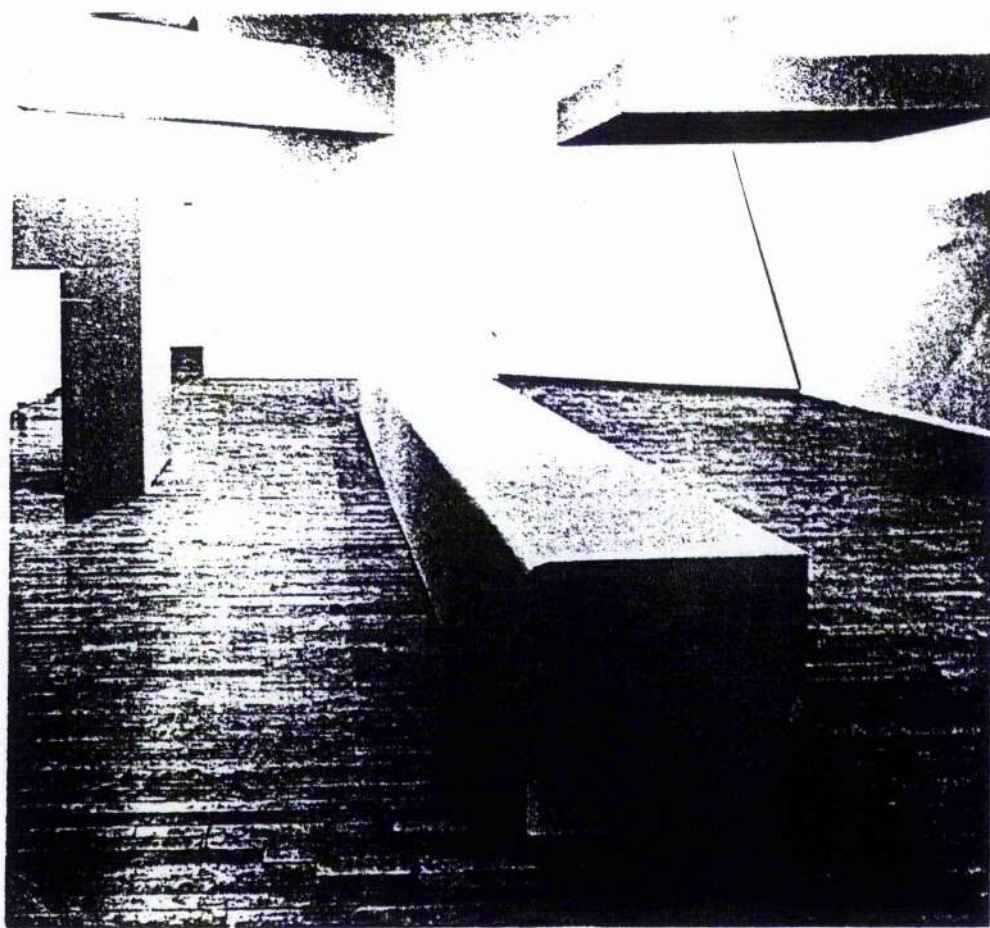


Fig. 1. Robert Morris, from right to left, *Untitled (Table)*, *Untitled (Corner Beam)*, *Untitled (Floor Beam)*, *Untitled (Corner Piece)* and *Untitled (Cloud)*. Exhibition at the Green Gallery, New York, December 1964 - January 1965.

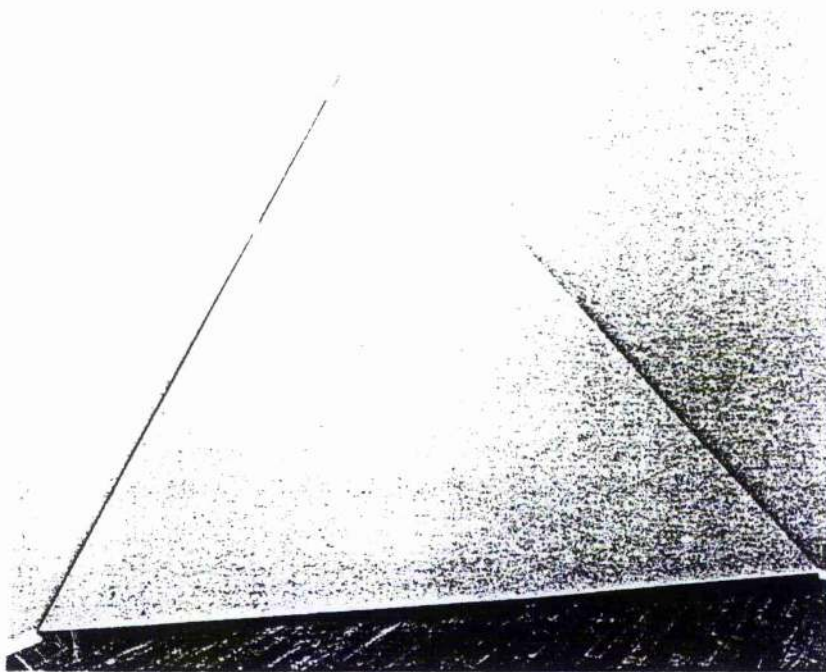


Fig. 2. Robert Morris, *Untitled (Corner Piece)*, painted plywood, 198.1 x 274.3 cm. Exhibition at the Green Gallery, New York, December 1964 - January 1965.

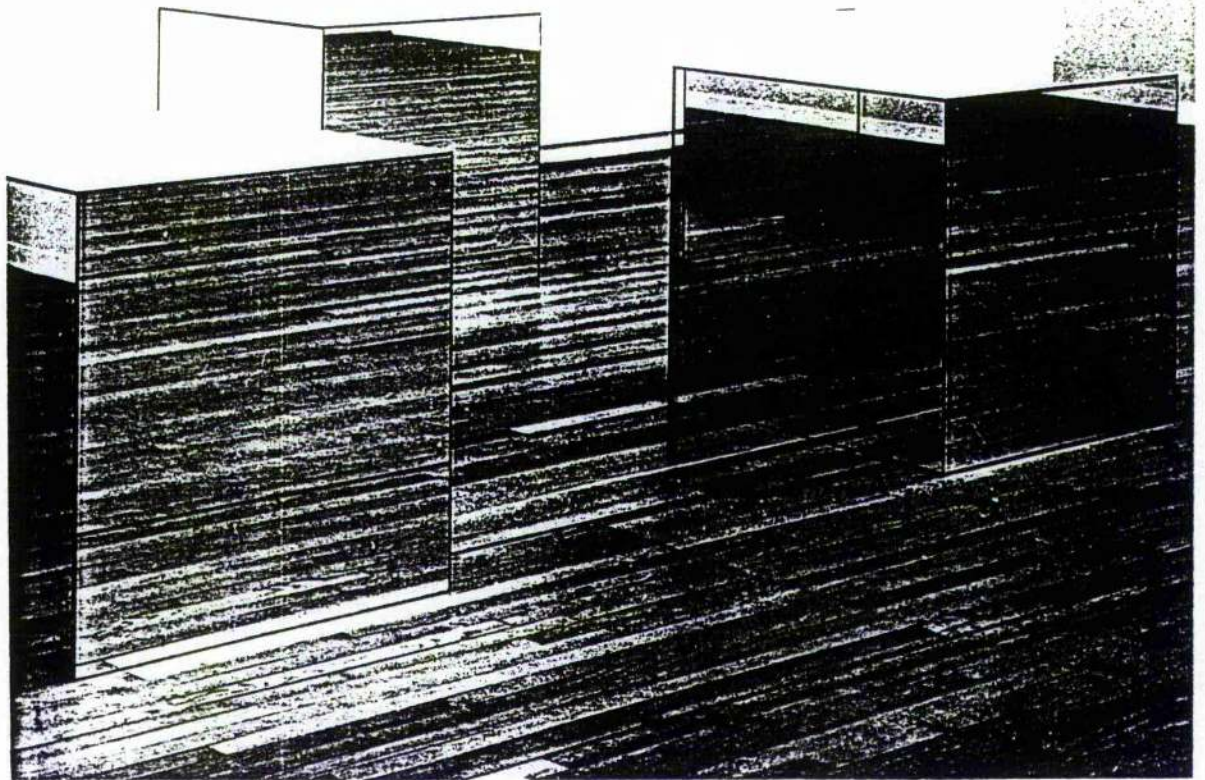


Fig. 3. Robert Morris, detail of three from a total four forms, *Untitled (Mirrored Cubes)*, plexiglas mirror on wood, four units, each 53.3 x 53.3 x 53.3 cm. 1971 refabrication of a 1965 original. Exhibition at the Green Gallery, New York, February 1965.

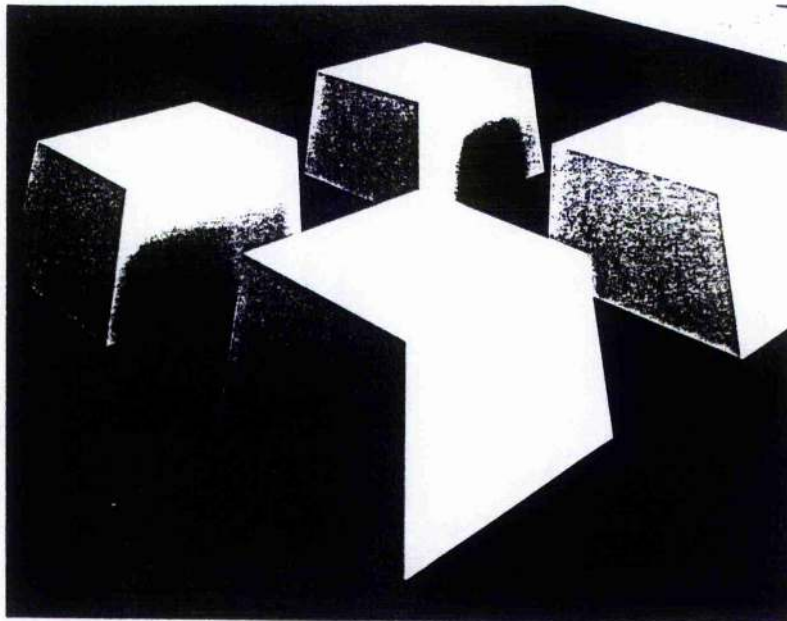


Fig. 4. Robert Morris, *Untitled (Battered Cubes)*, painted plywood, four units, each 61 x 91.4 x 91.4 cm. 1965. Exhibition at the Dwan Gallery, Los Angeles, March 15 - April 1, 1966.

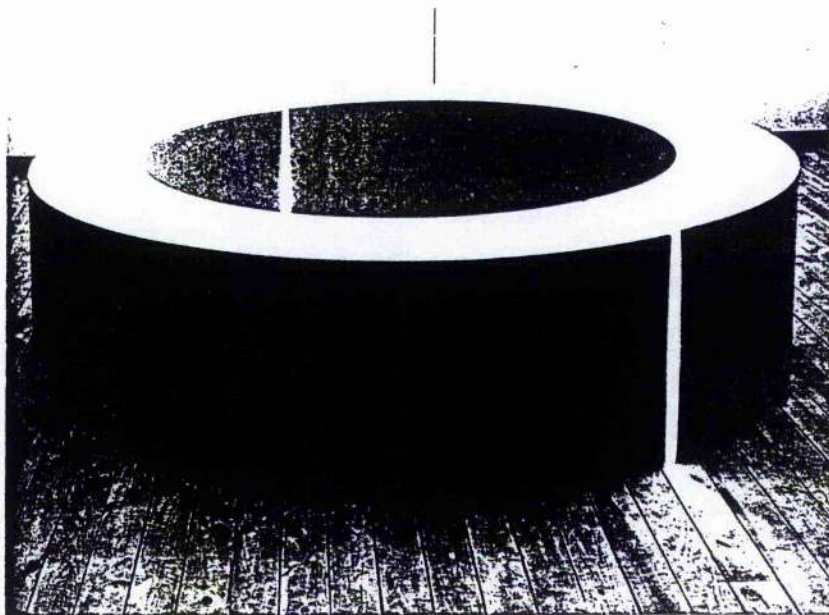


Fig. 5. Robert Morris, *Untitled (Ring with Light)*, painted plywood with fibreglass and fluorescent light, two units, each 61 cm high and 35.6 cm deep, overall 246.4 cm wide. 1965-66. Dallas Museum of Art.

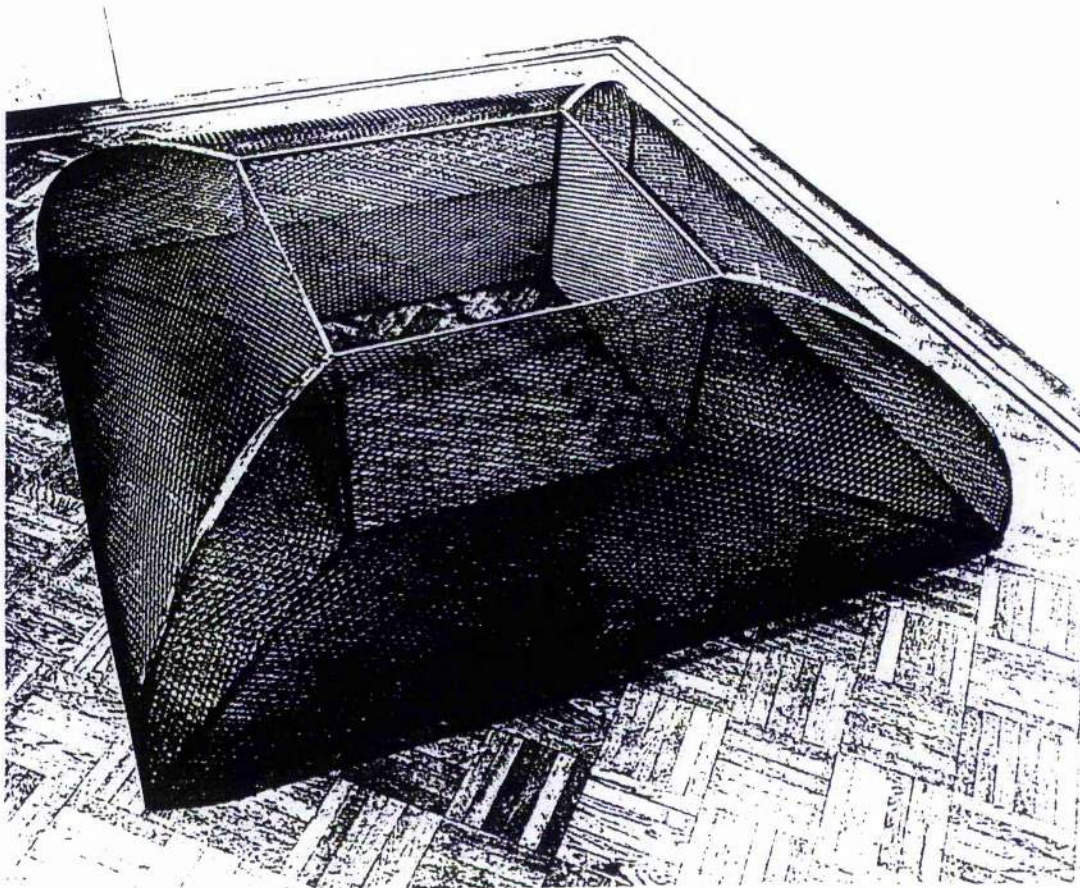


Fig. 6. Robert Morris, *Untitled (Quarter-Round Mesh)*, steel mesh, 78.7 x 276.9 x 276.9 cm. 1966. Solomon R. Guggenheim, New York, Panza Collection.

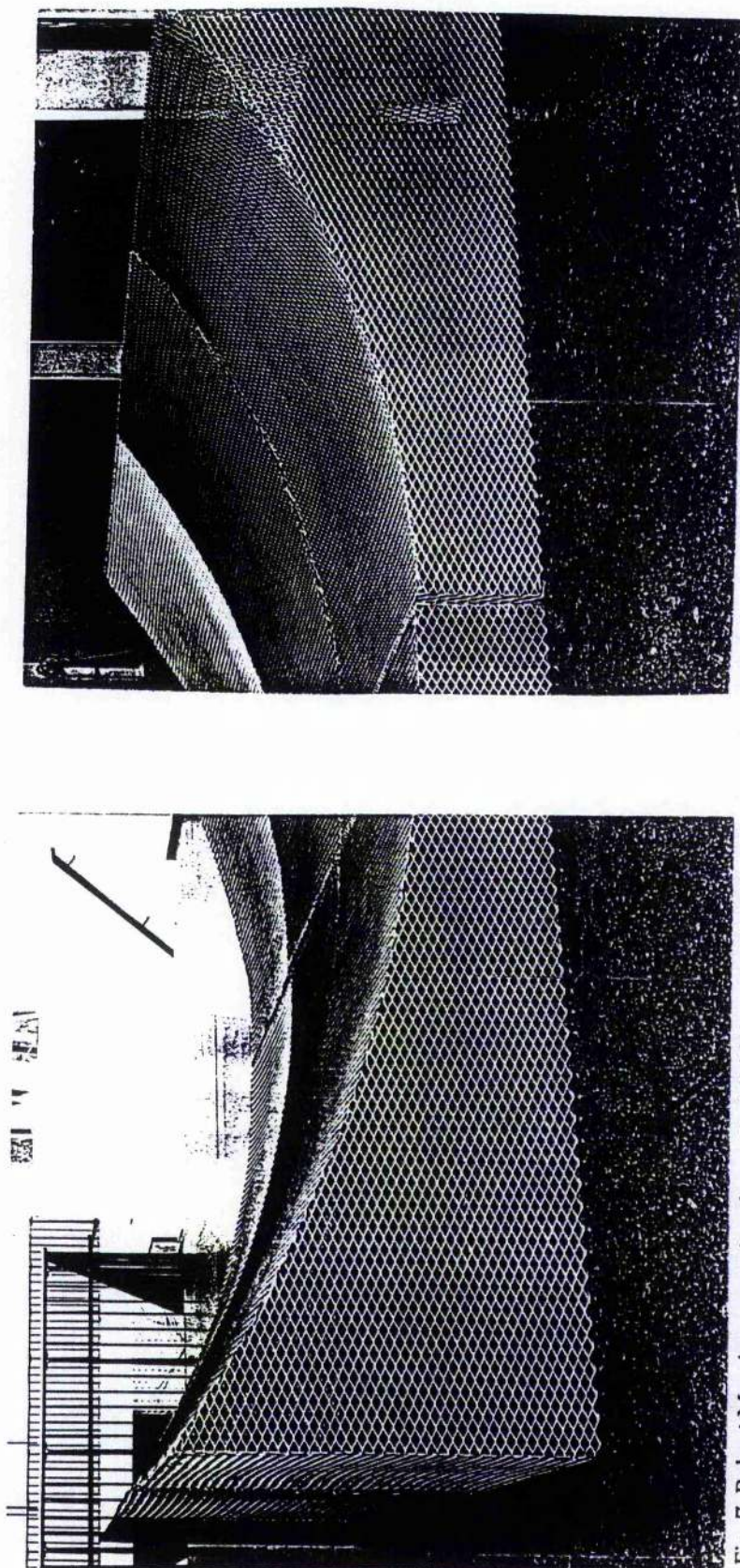


Fig. 7. Robert Morris, composite photo, *Untitled (Slung Mesh)*, aluminium mesh, six units, 0.91 x 3.66 x 3.33 m overall. 1968. Museum Ludwig, Cologne.

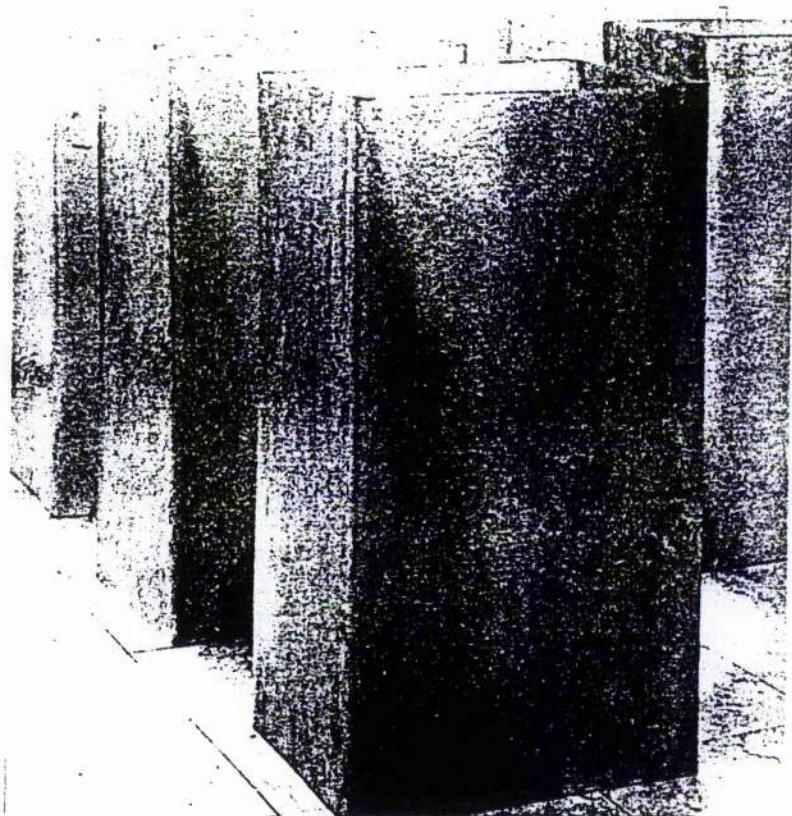


Fig. 8. Robert Morris, detail of five from a total nine forms, *Untitled (Nine Fibreglass Sleeves)*, translucent fibreglass, nine units, each 121.9 x 61 x 61 cm. 1967. Sonnabend Collection, New York.

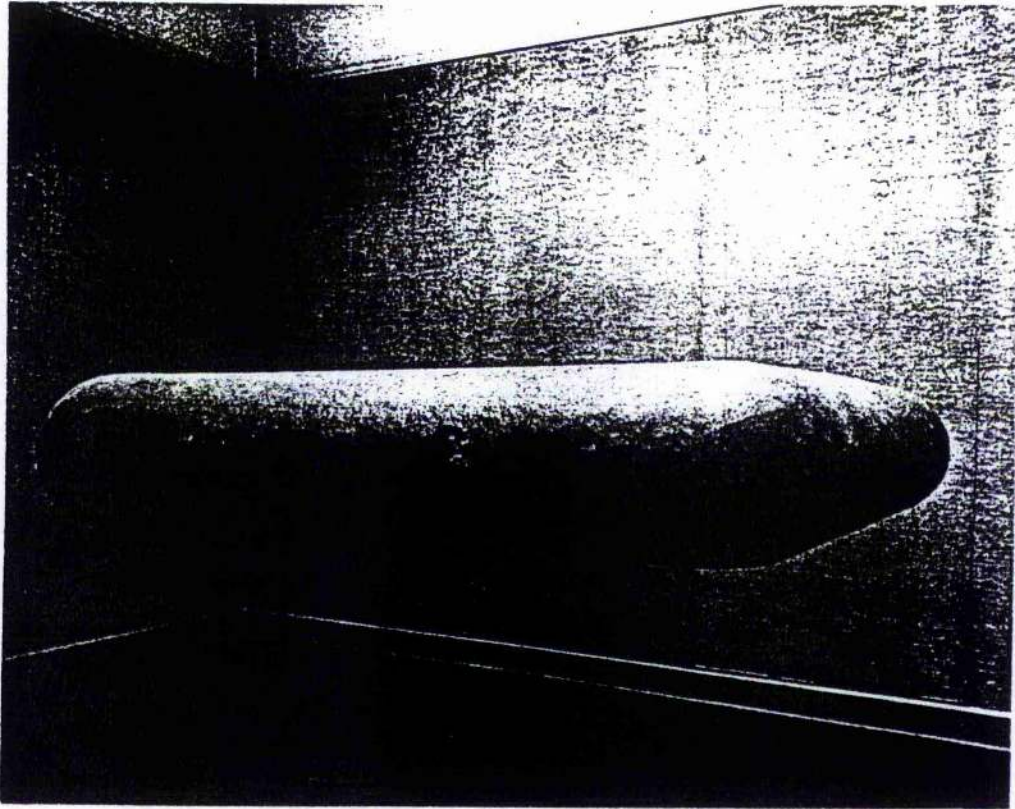


Fig. 9. Robert Morris, *Untitled (Fibreglass Cloud)*, translucent fibreglass and nylon threads, 45.7 x 244 x 244 cm. 1967. Tate Gallery, London.



Fig. 10. Robert Morris, *Untitled (Tangle)*, felt, 2.5 cm thick, overall dimensions variable. 1967. Collection Philip Johnson.



Fig. 11. Robert Morris, *Untitled (Tangle)*, felt, 264 pieces, each 1.3 cm thick, overall dimensions variable. 1967. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

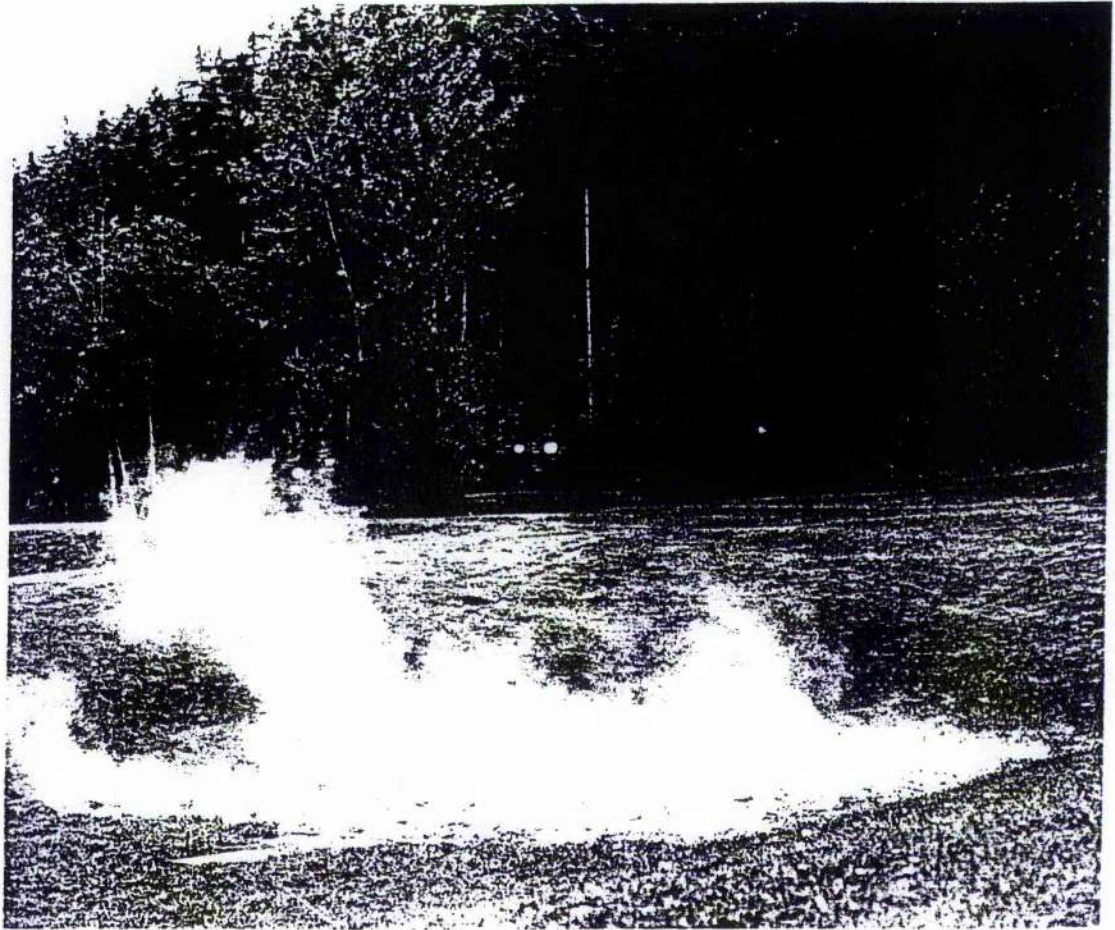


Fig. 12. Robert Morris, *Steam*, steam, multiple steam outlets under a bed of stones outlined with wood, overall dimensions variable. 1974 refabrication of a 1967 original. Western Washington University, Bellingham.

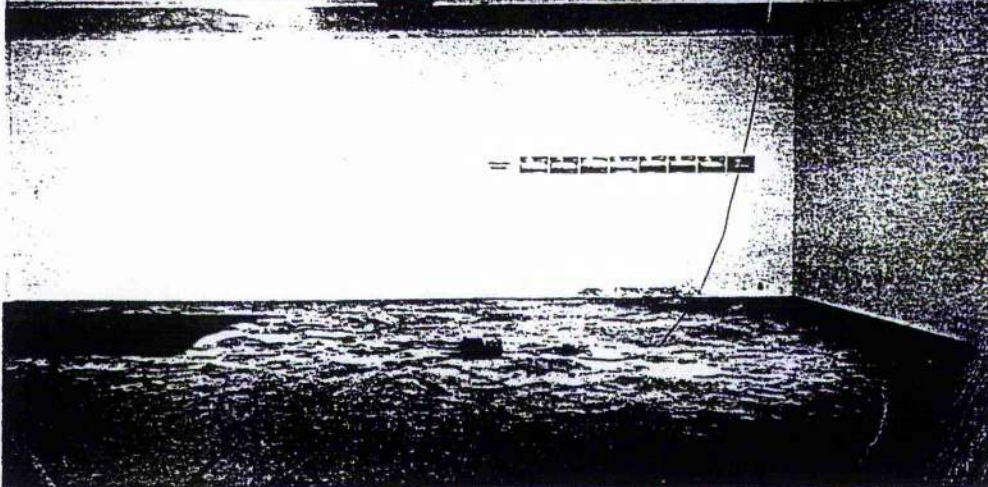
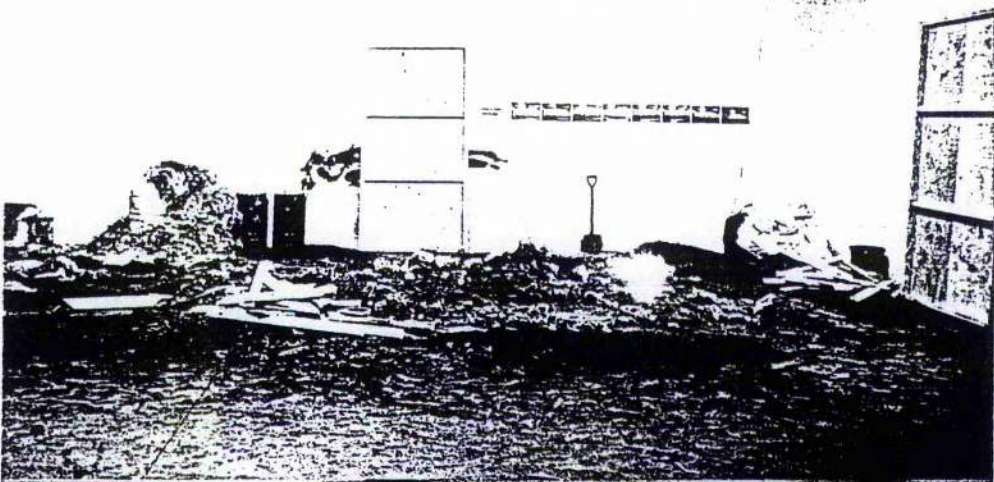
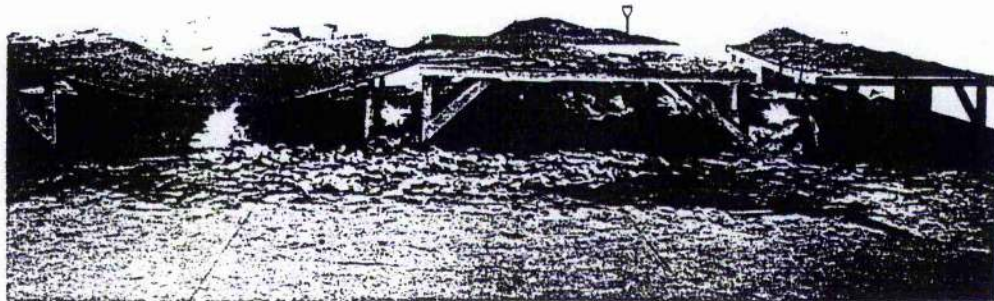


Fig. 13. Robert Morris, detail of three from a total six states, *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, mixed media, overall dimensions variable. 1969. Installation at the Leo Castelli Warehouse, New York, March 1 - 22, 1969.



Fig. 14. Robert Morris, *Untitled (Threadwaste)*, threadwaste, asphalt, mirrors, copper tubing and felt, overall dimensions variable. 1968. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 15. Robert Morris, detail, *Untitled (Dirt)*, earth, grease, peat moss, brick, steel, copper, aluminium, brass, zinc and felt, weighing a total of 907.18 kg, overall dimensions variable. 1968. Exhibition at Dwan Gallery, New York, October 1968.

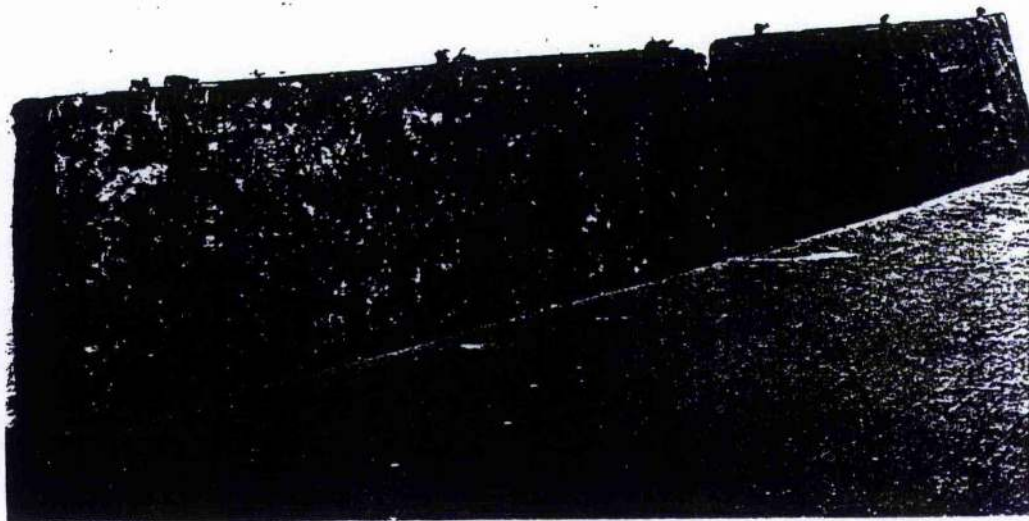


Fig. 16. Richard Serra, *Doors*, rubber and fibreglass, four parts, each 91.5 x 275 cm. 1966-1967. Akira Ikeda Gallery, Tokyo.

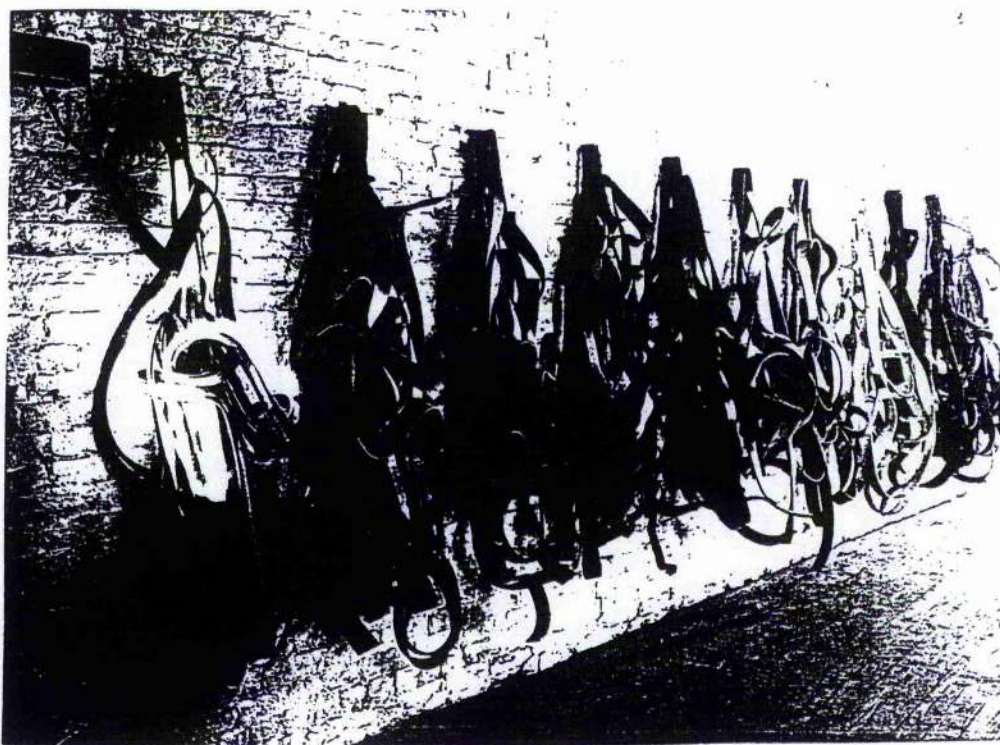


Fig. 17. Richard Serra, *Belts*, vulcanised rubber and blue neon tubing, 214 x 732 x 51 cm. 1966-1967. Collection of Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, Varese.

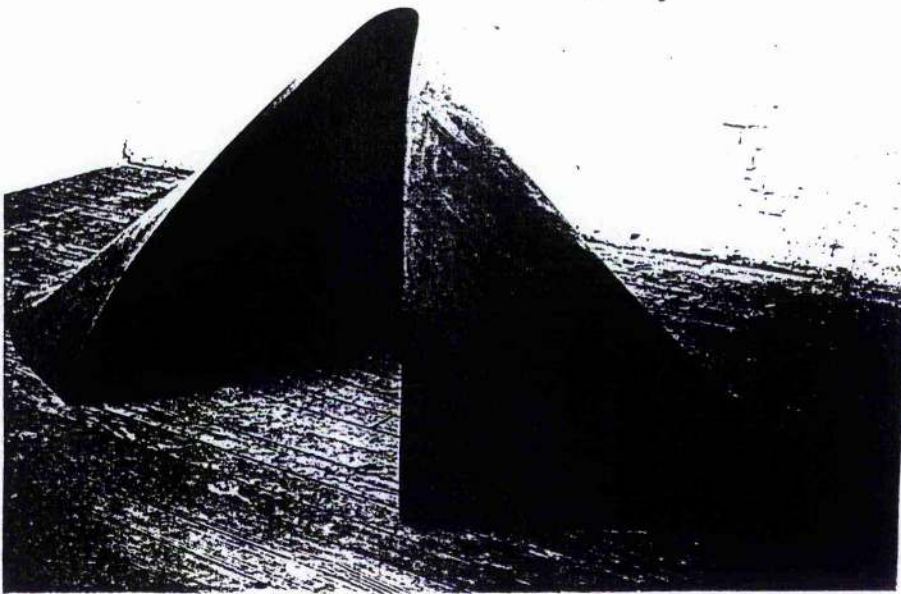


Fig. 18. Richard Serra, *To Lift*, vulcanised rubber, 91.5 x 203 cm. 1967.
Galerie Reinhard Onnasch, Berlin.

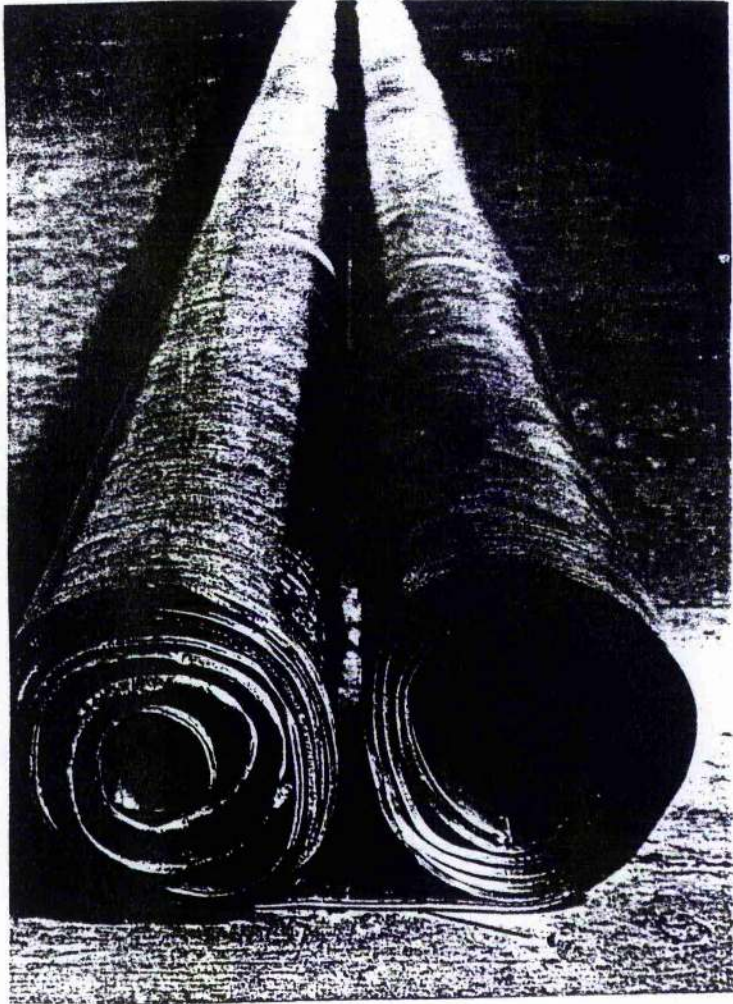


Fig. 19. Richard Serra, *Double Roll*, lead, 15 x 15 x 244 cm.
1968. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.



Fig. 20. Richard Serra, *Casting*, lead, 10 x 762 x 457 cm. 1969. Installed and later destroyed, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1969.

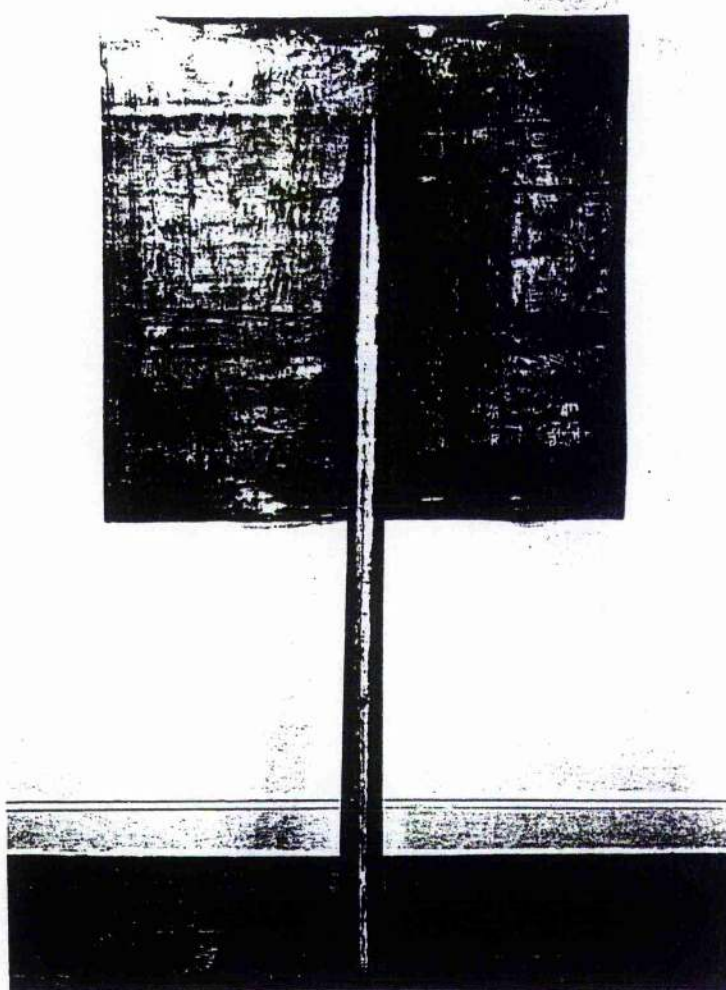


Fig. 21. Richard Serra, *Prop*, lead antimony, plate: 152 x 152 cm, pole: 244 cm. 1968. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

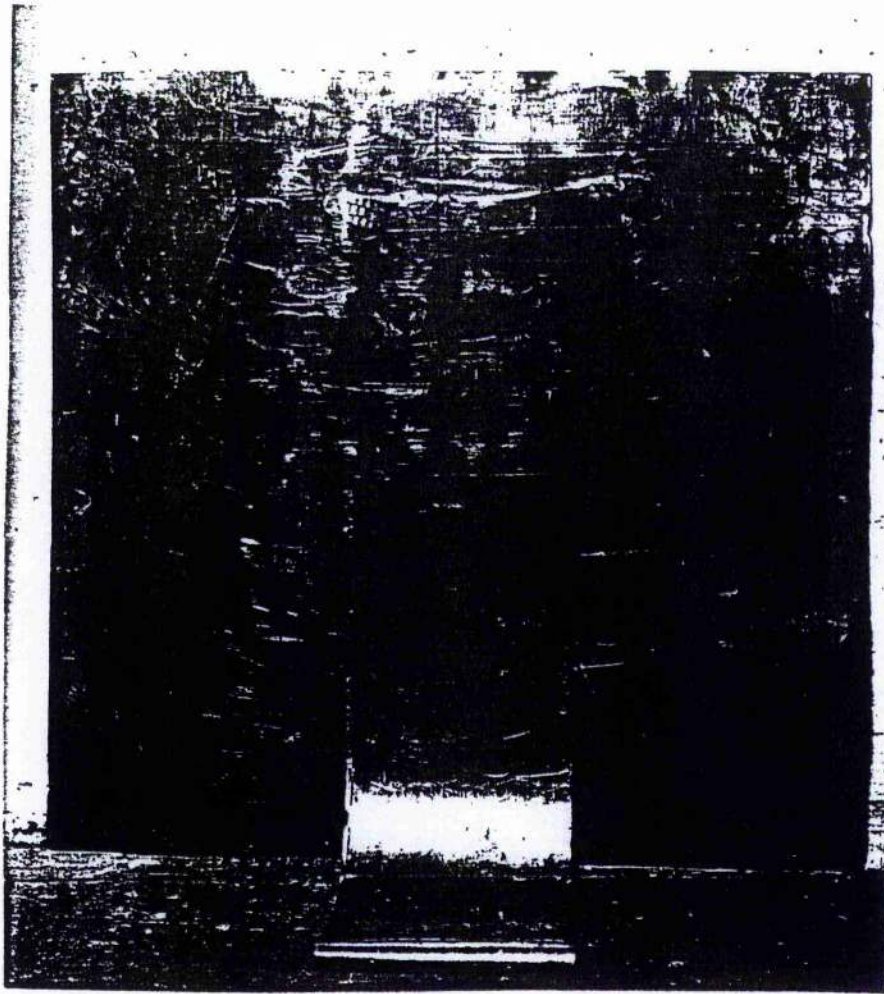


Fig. 22. Richard Serra, *Right Angle Prop*, lead antimony, 183 x 183 cm. 1969. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

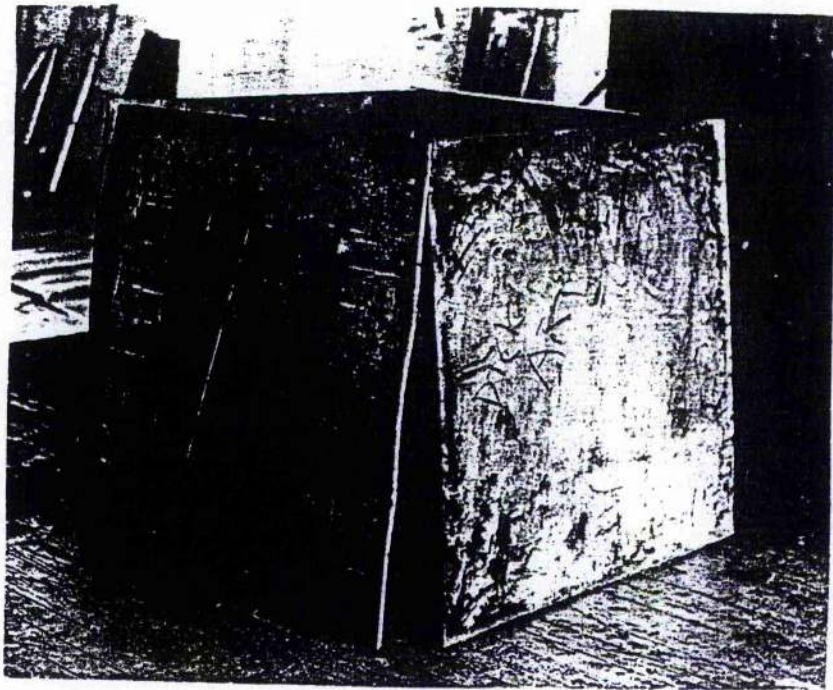


Fig. 23. Richard Serra, *One Ton Prop (House of Cards)* lead antimony, four plates, each 122 x 122 cm. 1969. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

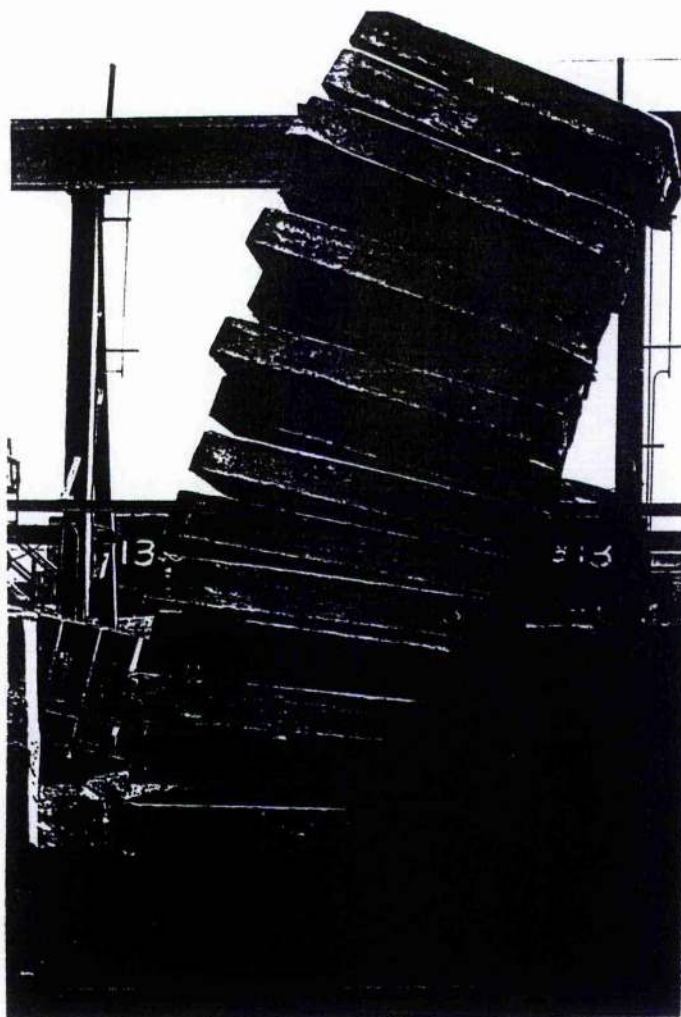


Fig. 24. Richard Serra, *Skullcracker Series: Stacked Steel Slabs*, hot rolled steel, sixteen slabs, 610 x 244 x 305 cm overall. 1969. Installed and later destroyed, Kaiser Steel Corporation, Fontana, California, 1969.

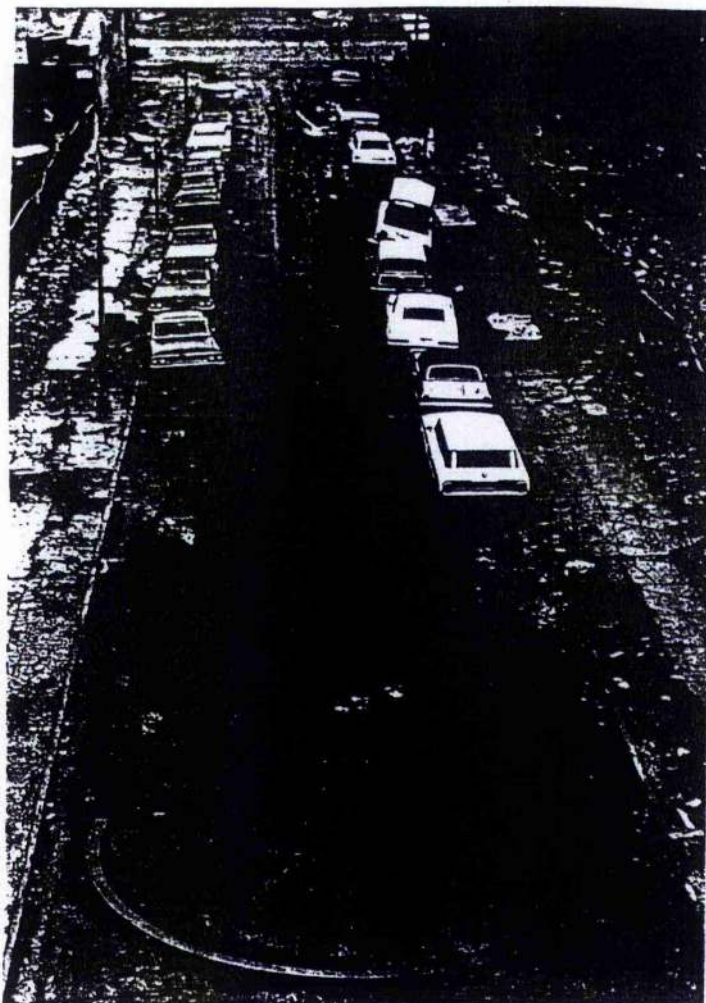
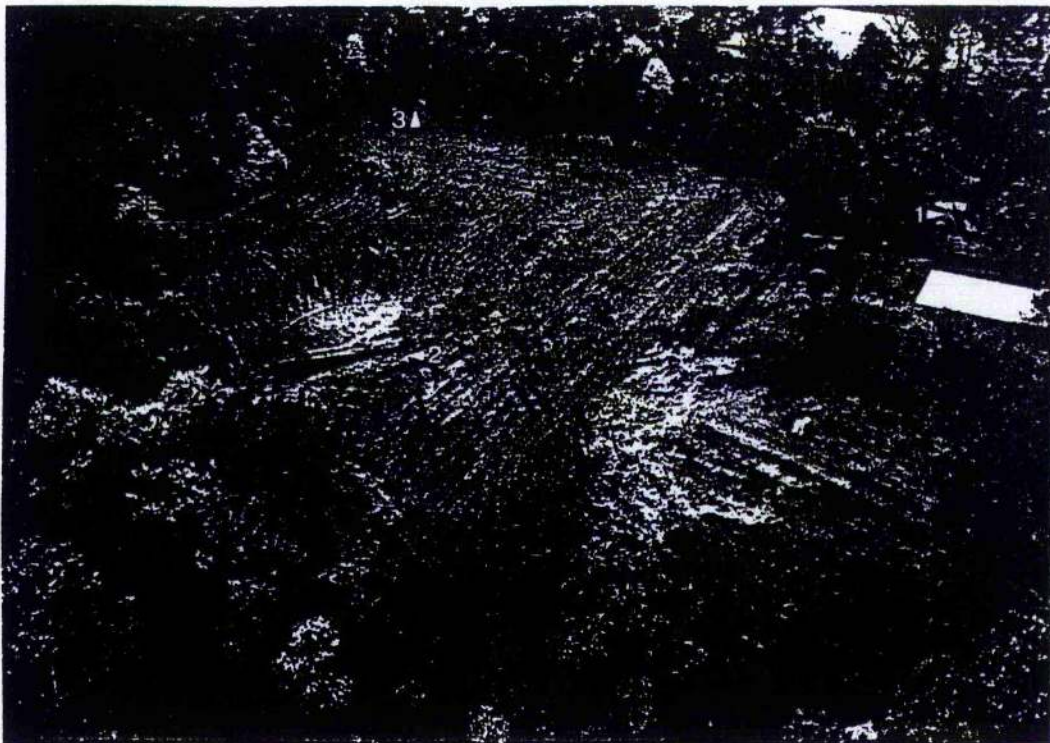


Fig. 25. Richard Serra, *To Encircle Base Plate Hexagram, Right Angles Inverted*, steel, rim 2.5 x 20 cm, diameter 792 cm. 1970. Installed between 183 Street and Webster Avenue, the Bronx, New York, 1970-1972.

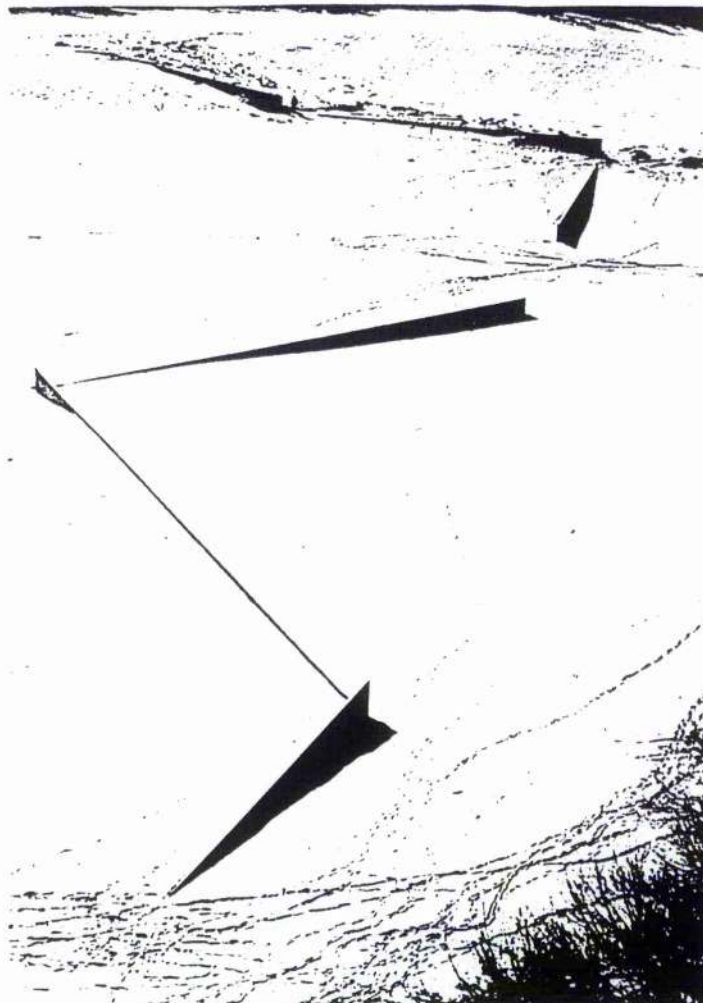


Figs. 26a and 26b. Richard Serra, above and below, *Pulitzer Piece: Stepped Elevation*, Cor-Ten steel, three plates, (1) 152 cm x 12.27 m x 5 cm, (2) 152 cm x 14 m x 5 cm, (3) 152 cm x 15.42 m x 5 cm. 1970-1971. Located in a 137 x 137 m area, Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Pulitzer, Jr., St. Louis.





Figs. 27a and 27b, Richard Serra, above and below, *Shift*, concrete, six sections, each ranging from 152 cm x 27.43 m x 20 cm to 152 cm x 73.15 m x 20 cm. 1970-1972. Installed in King City, Ontario. Collection of Roger Davidson, Toronto.



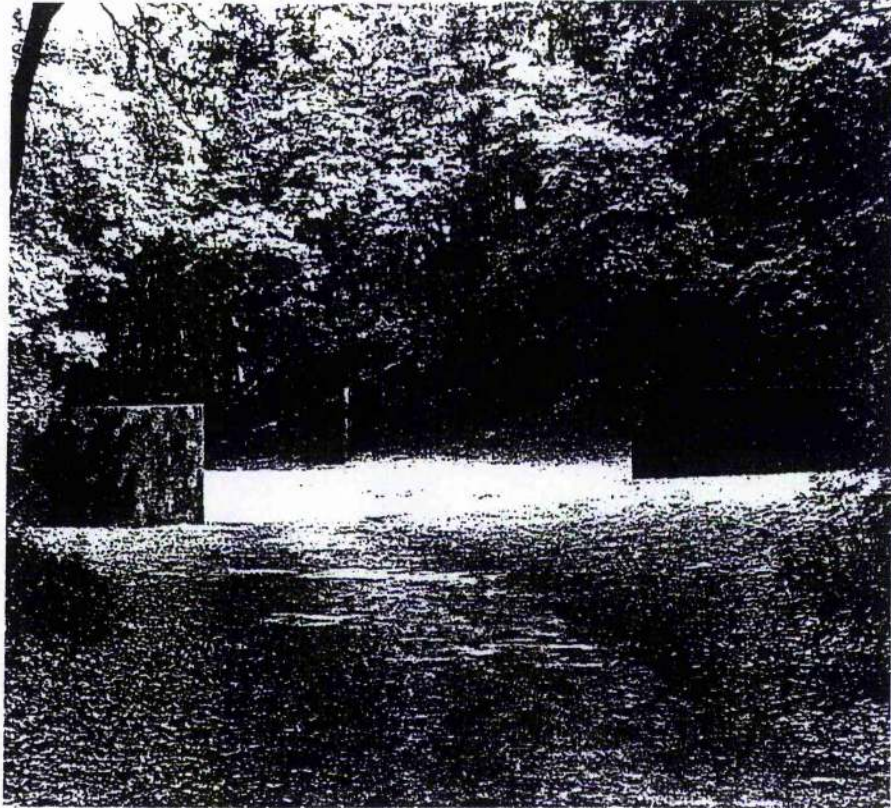


Fig. 28. Richard Serra, *Spin Out: For Bob Smithson*, hot rolled steel, three plates, each 305 cm x 12.19 m 4 cm. 1972-1973. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo.

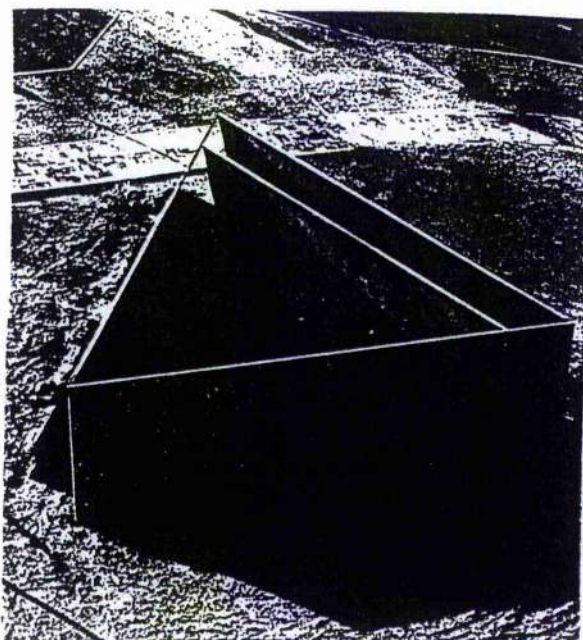


Fig. 29. Richard Serra, *Wright's Triangle*,
Cor-Ten steel, 305 cm x 10.97 m x 10.97 m.
1976-1980. Installed at Western Washington
University, Bellingham.

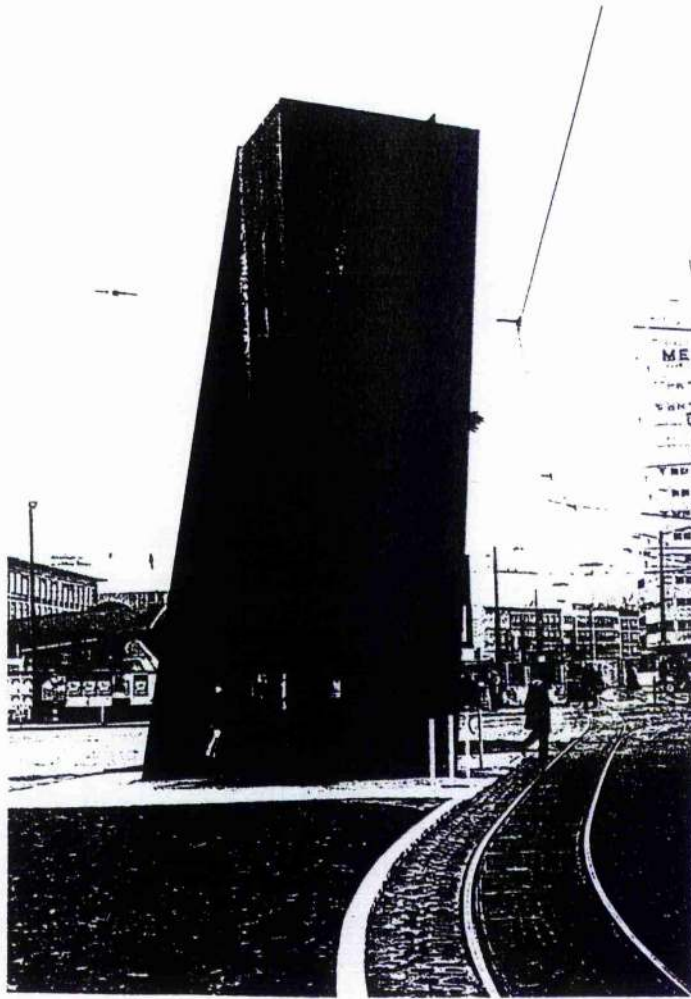
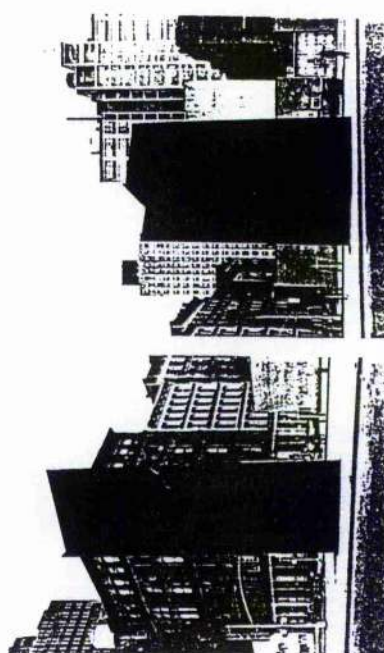
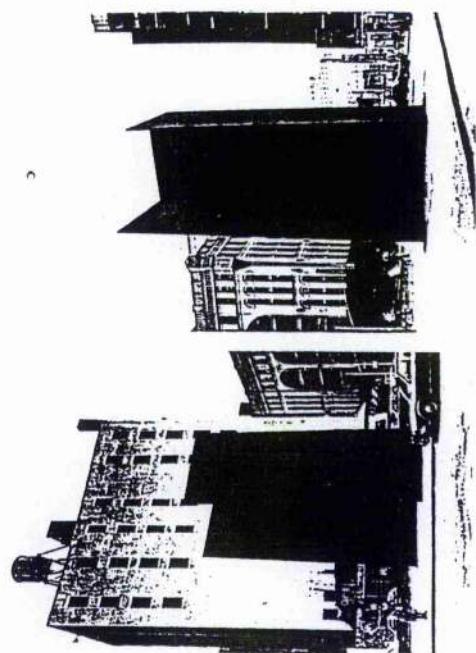
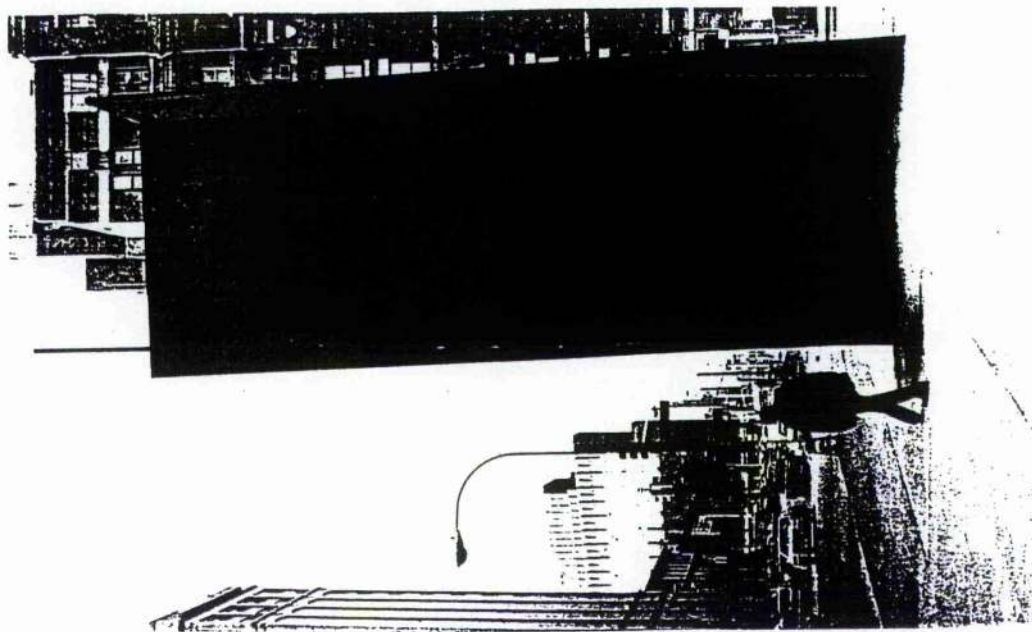


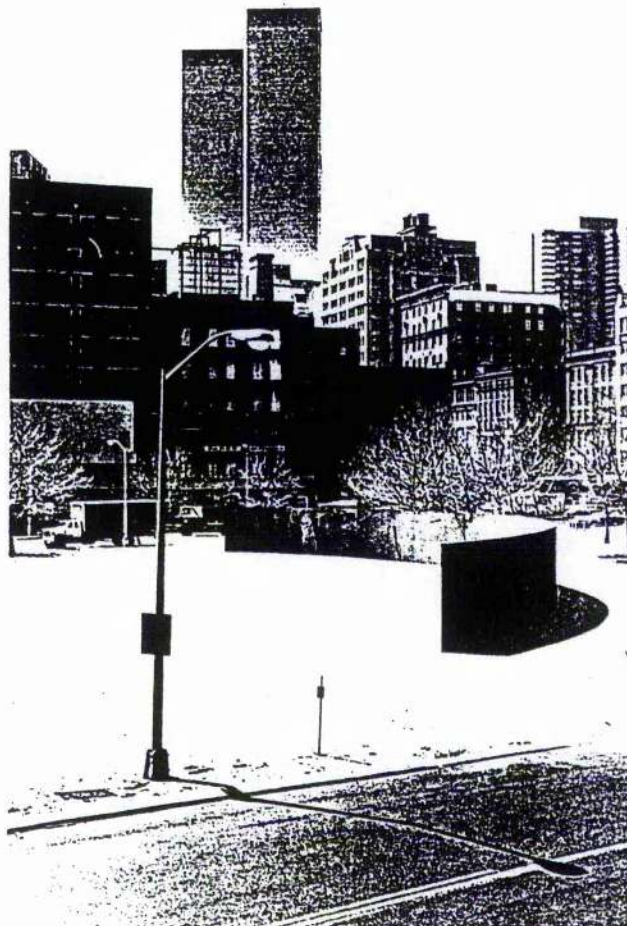
Fig. 30. Richard Serra, *Terminal*, Cor-Ten steel, four trapezoidal plates, each 12.50 m x 274 to 366 cm (irregular) x 6.5 cm. 1977. Installed at the Hauptbahnhof, Bochum. Collection of the City of Bochum.



Figs. 30a and 30b. Richard Serra, left and right, *T.W.U.*, Cor-Ten steel, three plates, each 10.97 m x 366 cm x 7 cm. Installed on West Broadway between Leonard and Franklin Street, New York, 1980-1982.



Figs. 31a and 31b. Richard Serra, above and below,
St. John's Rotary Arc, Cor-Ten steel, 366 cm x 60.96 m x
 6.5 cm. 1980. Installed at the Holland Tunnel exit, New
 York, 1980-1988.



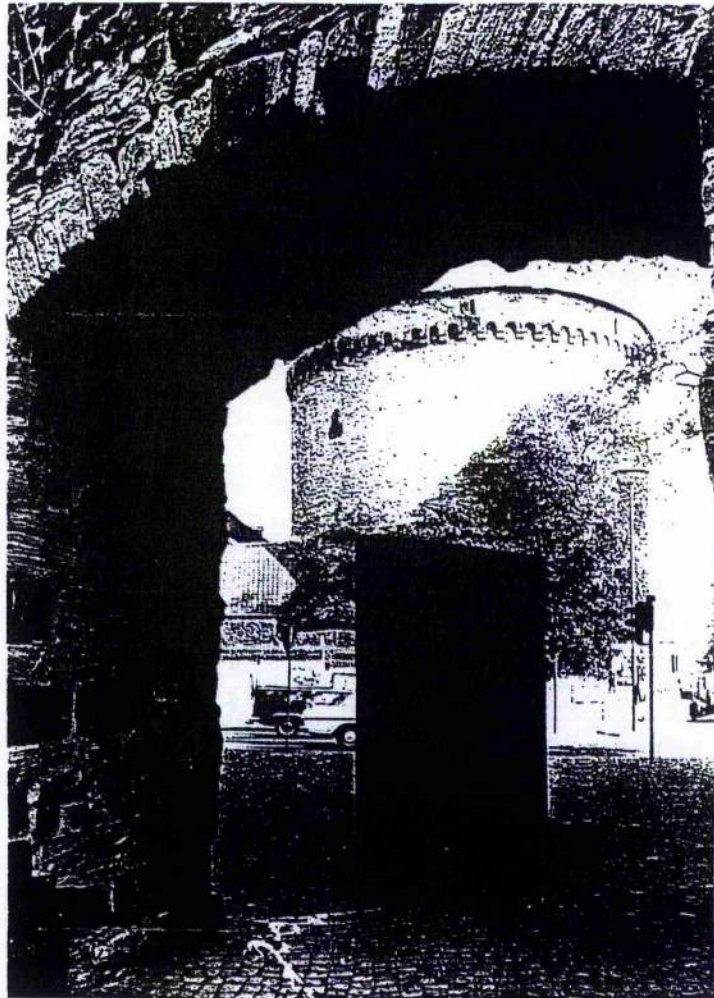


Fig. 32. Richard Serra, *Gedenkstätte Goslar*, forged steel, 279 x 279 x 28 cm. 1981. Installed in Goslar. Collection of the City of Goslar.



Figs. 33a and 33b. Richard Serra, above and below, *Tilted Arc*, Cor-Ten steel, 366 cm x 36.58 m x 6.5 cm. 1981. Installed in the Federal Plaza, New York, and destroyed March 15, 1989.

